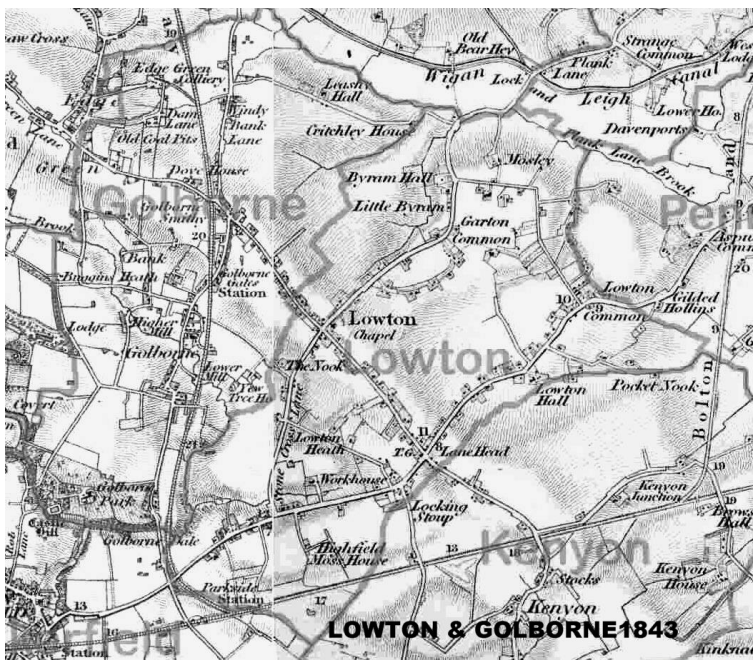


LOWTON COMMON

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO



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LOWTON COMMON A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

John Henry Talbot, my grandfather, had an elder brother whose name was James. He married Annie Edwardson in April 1891 and they had 4 sons and 4 daughters. John Henry married Ellen Morris in the following year, and for some years they shared her parents' cottage, which was situated in Lowton Common.

After my father died in 1982, I was sorting through a pile of his papers when I came across a well-preserved cutting dated June 3rd, 1887, from the local newspaper then called "The Chronicle". It describes a visit to that part of Lowton, and as the area is now much altered – very nearly beyond recognition - I feel that the article is well worth quoting. I must first point out, however, that the "village common" which the writer refers to as forming a part of Lowton was, in fact, in Pennington. So, too, was Knott's Mill, of which he also makes mention in passing.

"Does anyone residing in that densely populated district, in about the centre of which stands that magnificent and palatial structure, the Leigh and Bedford Railway Station, desire to escape for a while, and at small cost, from its shops, mills, works, narrow streets, and tortuous back roads, and rusticate for an hour or two in the country, let him book at the above-named place for the startling sum of about 2d, to Pennington, and in less than 5 minutes he will find himself away from the 'madding crowd' and buried in the locality known as Bradshaw Leach, and in sight of that fair specimen of a modern and it may be said also, a model Lancashire village called Lowton Common.

“He need not go expecting to see anything in the way of lordly mansions and extensive parks, for Lowton Common has no aristocracy but the aristocracy of native worth with honour clad, quiet, orderly, industrious, thrifty, church and chapel-going people, who live in rows of humble but remarkably neat looking and well kept cottages.

“At the foot of the railway bridge a little to the right is the veritable village common, not yet taken in or taken from the youth of Lowton as a playground. Almost opposite, on the other side of the way, stands a neat and newly whitewashed little farm house which, not many years ago, was the village inn, and was known by the name of ‘Robin Hood’. On its front gable was a rather extensive sign-board, illustrating Robin himself in the full practice of archery, and underneath was his invitation to the passers-by in the following words:-

‘Come all ye jolly archers stout and good,
Pray call and take a glass with Robin
Hood...’(etc.)

“Passing on we come to Knott’s Mill ... the hum of whose machinery tells of the busy workers within, who are bread winners of the present day people of Lowton Common, and a little further on the left stands self-proclaimed the residence of that fast disappearing race – the village medicine man – who makes it known to the world that he is a dealer in herbs, roots and medicinal oils. Not far further on may be seen rows of cottages, low-roofed and many-windowed, telling of the old days of handloom weaving, when every house almost had its weaving shop, and shuttles were clicking in almost every tenement.”

The fact that the writer makes no mention of that unmissable present-day feature of the landscape close to

where his walk began – i.e. Pennington Flash – can be explained quite easily. In 1887 it had not yet appeared. The ground there was subject to flooding, but it was still in use as farmland: It was round about the turn of the century when the lake now known as “The Flash” formed as a result of mining subsidence.

Now the writer walks on a little further:



“Next comes the church of Lowton St. Mary’s” (this had been built in the 1860s to serve the rapidly increasing population: from it that part of Lowton takes its present name) “with clock in front and graveyard around, all trim, clean, and remarkably well-kept.” (Next to it was, and is, the church school, but for some reason this is not referred to.) “But perhaps, no prettier sight is to be seen in Lowton Common than that of two thatched cottages, near to the church, but standing a little apart, which for neatness, outside ornamentation, an rural appearance, the writer, at least, has never seen equalled. Who that has seen them on a bright May morning does not instinctively remember the famous lines of Mrs Hemans –

‘The cottage homes of England
How beautiful they stand.’

“There is also the ‘Jolly Carter’, an inn which was evidently, in all its glory as a house of call in bygone days when carts, wagons and coaches did all the traffic between Bolton, Leigh and Warrington, and Newton races were the event of the year. A couple of peaceful-looking farm houses a little way from the roadside and almost buried with fruit trees in full bloom complete the objects worthy of note between the two bridges... ‘What place is that?’ said the writer, accosting a buxom dame on his return, as he stopped in front of an old building, which bore the following inscription:-

“Built by Shares
1849”.

‘That’s th’owd chapel’ replied she, ‘but yond’s th’new un’.’”



To the new one he went, and found it to be a comparatively modern chapel, which bore no inscription at all.

“It wur t’sermons theer o’ Sunday’, said another good lady. Domestic cares prevented any further communication from her as to the particulars of that event, which is nothing less than an annual jubilee held at Lowton Common, and the following detailed description of it from one who was present is full of interest to all lovers of chapels and Sunday schools.”

I intend to quote that description below – but first a few comments on Lowton Common as the anonymous writer saw it. He paints a quite idyllic picture of a country village bathed in summer sunshine, and it is true that as many of the farmhouses were in those days flanked by orchards, and as there still remained a good deal of green pastureland in and around that immediate area, it must have seemed especially attractive to a visitor arriving from the smoky streets of Leigh. It was during the early 1900s that most of the redbrick terraced houses which now line long stretches of the roadside were built as homes for a new influx of “incomers”.

One of the “peaceful looking farmhouses”, however, had been the scene of a gory murder which had taken place less than 4 years previously. This typified the dark sub-currents which often lurk below the surface of apparent calm and placid waters. There is a full account of the murder in Mr. Ridyard’s ‘Memories of Lowton’. It seems that Joshua Rigby, the elderly tenant of Cheetham Fold Farm was found lying dead on the floor of his bedroom on a bright September morning, when his men were already at work in the fields. His throat had been cut (there was blood everywhere), and, in addition, a wound to his head was later ascertained to have been made by a heavy, blunt instrument of some description.

He had been well known by all his neighbours as a thoroughly unpleasant and 'nowty mon', who had ill-treated his aged sister by beating her often and brutally. He had also been rich and miserly; given to boasting about his accumulated savings. It was claimed later that his nephew, John Gibbons, had virtually blackmailed old Joshua into making a will in his favour; therefore John was the obvious suspect. Evidence given at the coroner's inquest, which was held at the 'Jolly Carter', also suggested that John must be guilty. He was arrested and imprisoned, but at the trial the evidence was found insufficient to procure a conviction. Gibbons was set free, and returned home triumphant. But some of the more superstitious villagers claimed that Joshua's ghost returned, and was to be seen from time to time stalking the deserted fields and footpaths in the neighbourhood of Cheetham Fold Farm during the long, dark nights of winter.

It is instructive to read the names and occupations of the jurors at the inquest, held in the autumn of 1883. They were: W. Page, schoolmaster, who served as foreman of the jury; Henry Boydell, silk weaver; W. Marsh, weaver; James Ince, grocer; Richard Battersby, weaver; James Turton, weaver; George Marsh, weaver; Peter Hesford, night watchman at Knott's Mill; Richard Eckersley, clerk at Knott's Mill; James Pollitt, gentleman; Henry Penkethman, farmer; and George Howard, bootmaker.

Only one of these men is described as being at that date a silk weaver, but there were still others in the village, one of them being William Morris, John Henry Talbot's father-in-law. He continued to weave silk at home on a handloom until the time of his death, which occurred in 1900. My father treasured the memory of having been allowed, as a small child, to stand and watch as his grandfather worked steadily away at his loom. One of my mother's great-

grandfathers, William Winstanley of Lowton Common, had also carried on the craft of silk weaving until his death in 1888. We have his obituary from a local newspaper, in which his weaving is described as “an employment he was very fond of.” I am assured that this was perfectly true, as was the report that William had only just finished setting up a new warp when he succumbed – at the age of 75 – to the illness that proved fatal.



Rachel Smith silk winding by hand at Hesketh Meddows

These handloom weavers of the late 19th century were highly skilled exponents of their craft, who could be entrusted with “special orders”. Most of the silk fabrics they wove will have been made up into ladies’ dresses. Factory-woven silk was by then available, but that of the highest quality was still manufactured by hand. If the writer of the newspaper article from which I have quoted above had continued his walk a little further, after passing the new Vicarage he would have come shortly thereafter to the “Pink House”, not far from Lowton Hall. It stood at right angles to Newton Road (which at that time was called

Mather Lane), and it was surrounded by a colourful garden. This was the home of Mrs. Marsh, who in 1910 wove the last piece of silk ever produced on a handloom in Lowton. Together with a former weaver, Rachel Smith, who in old age had become her bobbin-winder, she was engaged on more than one occasion to demonstrate her skills at the Lancashire Royal Show: by this time her craft had come to be looked on as quite a curiosity. Mr. Ridyard reports in his book that during the course of her working life she had woven silks for purposes as different as, on the one hand, robes for a wealthy Indian prince, and, on the other, banners for churches and for local Sunday schools.

Rachel Smith lived in one of two old cottages just a little way down Hesketh Meadow Lane. The Ridyard family lived in the other. Everyone thereabouts knew 'Owd Rachel', and my father used to tell us the tale of how once, when out for a walk in Lowton, he met her and was told that she had learned through the ever-busy village grapevine that he had become engaged to be married. This, she informed him, meant that he was approaching the end of all his troubles. The year was 1918: he was in the army, and just about to return to Northern France. "I'm very pleased to hear it," he replied, whereupon – "Ah mean t'beginnin' end!" she cackled.

A later occupant of that same cottage – which, as a girl, I visited often – was Pollie Niblett, who, by coincidence, lived to exactly the same age as Rachel. They were both 91 when death claimed them. It was a typical 'two up, two down' dwelling, one room in depth, and with downstairs accommodation well-lit by windows both at front and at rear. Plenty of light had been essential to the weavers. The front door opened straight onto the lane, but behind the cottage was a long garden, which was Pollie's pride and joy. In her youth she had worked for a time at a plant

nursery on Aspull Common, and had discovered that she had 'green fingers'. Beyond the garden were the fields of Grundys' farm, to which she had access through a little wicket gate. To the left of this, and just within the garden, there was an exceptionally tall pear tree, which bore so much fruit in the autumn that Pollie was regularly able to give away pears by the basketful.

Soon after the Second World War, some American families came to Lowton: the men folk were airmen, based at Burtonwood. They had been provided with married quarters in buildings that had been erected during wartime to house men recruited into the Fleet Air Arm: they had received their basic training there. In order to reach these quarters it was necessary to drive along Newton Road, and then down Hesketh Meadow Lane thus passing Pollie's cottage on the way. Some of the wives were intrigued by it, and asked if they could see what it was like inside. Several took to visiting Pollie, and although she had become 'stone deaf' by then, they were able to communicate successfully as she was adept at lip-reading. If all else failed, it was always possible to resort to using pencil and paper. During the course of an afternoon visit, the brass-handled kettle would at some stage be filled, and set to boil on the open fire of the old-fashioned, black-leaded kitchen range. This took a great deal of looking after, but it did keep the room warm and cosy. Pollie and her guests would drink freshly-brewed tea out of pretty, rose-patterned china cups, whilst the fire crackled merrily, and the Victorian wall-mounted clock, with its slowly-swinging brass pendulum, ticked away soporifically. Afterwards, Pollie might allow herself to be persuaded to read the ladies' fortunes in the tea leaves left in their cups. This is a memory reinforced for me by the fact that I now have the china that was used.

Finally, the guests would be shown around the garden. A stranger, remaining outside in the lane, would not have suspected that it existed, but it was in fact, quite extensive: long, and with space enough to grow flowers and herbs as well as an assortment of more mundane vegetables. In the old days the weavers had been able to supplement their diet by growing some of their own food. Pollie's guests from across the Atlantic were invariably thrilled by receiving what they regarded as a genuine glimpse of the "real old England". After they left Lowton and returned home several made a point of keeping in touch: they wrote long, chatty letters to Pollie, and always asked for the latest news of Lowton. The cottage did, in fact, provide an ideal home for an elderly lady who lived alone. When I look back at old records, however, and think of the size of what used to be considered an average 19th century family, I do wonder how so many children were ever crammed into such sparse accommodation.

Many of the people who lived in Lowton Common attended the Independent Methodist Chapel. Both my grandfathers, John Henry Talbot and Peter Cleworth (who came from Leigh) had been brought up as members of the Church of England, but both married Independent Methodist wives. My mother's maternal grandfather, Joseph Hesford, was a local preacher, well-known throughout the Warrington circuit. He had been born in Croft, and had lived there during his early childhood, but after his father died and his mother re-married and went to live in Bolton, he was taken in by an uncle and aunt, Matthew and Catherine Howarth of Liptrot Farm, Lowton. Joseph married Margaret, William Winstanley's daughter; all these people were Independent Methodists.

Now to return to the newspaper article, which continues in the following words:

“There are as many sorts of Methodists as pigeons, and it would puzzle the outsider to tell what is the difference in many of them. We have Wesleyan Methodists, New Connexion Methodists, Primitive Methodists... (etc. etc.). That there should be splits upon questions of doctrinal theology in a body whose standard of theology is the particular creed of one man is not surprising. It is not wonderful that among the thousands of Methodists teachers there are some turn up now and then who cannot ‘*ex animo*’ accept the Sermons of Wesley and his notes on the New Testament as final in theological science... In the case of the Independent Methodists, one of the smaller of the Methodist family, the case is, however, somewhat different from the rest, for while in a general way agreeing with other Methodists as to general theology, they have laid down as a fundamental article of their creed that is wrong, utterly contrary to the teaching of the Apostles and the usages of the Primitive Church to have professional or hired ministers. The parson gets his food when on service, or his travelling expenses when required, but nothing in the shape of a salary. With him it is a question of “freely ye have received, freely give”, and it is not a theory merely, it is a rigid practice.

“When I was a lad, fifty years ago, I knew one of the first apostles of this church or society. He made bricks in summer and wore cotton in winter, preaching whiles, as occasion served, or his brethren required of him. A boyish curate, fresh from ordination in his first cure, called as he went along upon old John Bentley. John was in his loom, but he listened with attention to his visitor:

‘I hear you preach, John?’

'Aye, sometimes.'

'Indeed! I cannot make out how you can preach, never having had any education for the purpose, while I find it difficult to do this, after years of special training in the University. How do you do it?'

'Well, I've had no larning for th' job, but I read my bible and think it over, and do the best I can. But I think, with all my disadvantages, I could preach from a text that you, with all your knowledge of grammar, and the original languages of the Scripture, would find yourself unable to tackle.'

'Aye, indeed, and what might that be?' said he, getting rather warm.

"These hands have ministered to my necessities and to those that are with me." How would yo' deal with this text if yo' were preaching from it?'

The curate saw that his pastoral visit was at an end, and he left old John to his picking peg and loom, and old Hannah to her pin-winding, and sought out less exacting auditors among his flock."

The success of the Independent Methodist movement during the 19th century was, indeed, due to the fact that within their church it was taken for granted that all men were created equal, and that those who devoted mental energy to the mulling over of biblical texts were entitled to pass on the messages inspired by them to other members of their chapel congregations. They would discuss them in down-to-earth language, using the image of everyday life to help engage their listeners' interest. By these means they were able to succeed in evoking enthusiastic

responses in the minds of people who were quite unmoved by the stereotypical, patronising sermons often delivered by the ordained clergy. Then, too, there was the hymn-singing, popular in all Methodist chapels. Everyone enjoys a good, hearty sing-song, even the crowds who go to football matches! It enables people to let off steam, and to share in a communal expression of beliefs and attitudes about which they feel strongly. Charles Wesley was well aware of this: he alone wrote over 5,000 hymns. Those which turned out to be the most popular, and which in the long run have been most enduring, have been those for which others wrote rousing tunes, easy to learn and easy to sing. Even non-churchgoers know “Hark! The herald angels sing”, (which is sung to a tune by Mendelssohn. He is said to have disapproved of its use in this way, and to have written to his publishers in England that he had had a martial theme in mind: not at all suitable for Christian worship!) Yet another Christmas hymn of the same period: “Christians, awake, salute the happy morn!” was one of those written by John Byrom. Although born in Manchester, he was related to the Byroms of Lowton, and I understand that he settled in the village after he inherited Byrom Hall there. He was a friend of John and Charles Wesley. The tune in which “Christians, awake!” is sung was composed by another of his friends, John Wainwright, who at the time was organist and choirmaster at what is now Manchester Cathedral.



A Wesleyan group began to hold meetings in Lowton in the 1780s. In 1794 a school/chapel was built on land donated by a local farmer, whose name was Richard Eckersley. But it was not long before trouble arose. Richard Ridyard, in his “Memories of Lowton” quotes an announcement which was printed as a footnote to a hymn-sheet dated 1810 (most people could not then afford hymn books):

“In this school there are upwards of 200 scholars taught to read every Lord’s day. (The Wesleyans aimed to teach both adults and children just sufficient skills to enable them to read one book – the Holy Bible, as well, of course, as words of the hymns written by both the Wesley brothers in order to help reinforce their message. Many of the latter dwelt on threats of Hell-fire as the certain and inescapable fate which lay in store for sinners and ‘back-sliders’. Therefore Christians must ask themselves the question:

“How then ought I on earth to live,
While God prolongs the kind reprieve,
And props the house of clay!
My sole concern, my single care,
To watch, and tremble, and prepare
Against the fatal day!

“No room for mirth or trifling here,
For worldly hope, or worldly fear,
If life so soon is gone:
If now the Judge is at the door,
And all mankind must stand before
Th’ inexorable throne!

“Nothing is worth a thought beneath
But how I may escape the death

That never , never dies... etc. etc.

In order that they might continue to benefit from such uncomfortable musings, more money was demanded of them:-) “The amount of collections and donations last year was £6. 9s. 0d. That our pecuniary assistance is insufficient must be obvious to anyone who considers that the above sum is on the average only sixpence for each scholar. We are therefore under the imperious necessity of adopting a plan that has long been in use at other places on such occasions, and which has always succeeded, viz. of receiving silver at the door. It is not intended to supersede but to be added to the collection, which will be made as usual after the sermon.”

Mr. Ridyard comments: “I cannot but think that this arrogant appeal was ill-advised on the part of the managers of the Institution, who largely hailed from Leigh, and judging from what followed I attribute the decline of Wesleyanism in Lowton to it... To demand the payment of a silver coin before being allowed to enter his place of worship” (as if he were paying to enter a theatre or some such place of entertainment) “and then being expected to contribute at the close of the sermon would be anathema to the sturdy independence of the average Lowtonian. From that time disputing began among the congregation, and in the course of a few years the members had dwindled down to 6: strange to say, they were all named Eckersley. The cause almost died out... often the place would be closed for several weeks at a time.”

At about the turn of the century, a number of men who lived in Warrington, and were connected with the Wesleyan movement but, like so many of those in Lowton, unhappy about the developments which had taken place since the death of the founder (John Wesley had died in

1791), Made the decision to break away and experiment with another form of Methodism based on “free gospel principles”, their motto being “A Free Church and a Free Ministry”. Each congregation was to be self-governing, and all preachers were to give their services free, for efforts to propagate the Gospel ought, they believed, to be a labour of love. The names of only three of these enterprising pioneers are still remembered nowadays: they were Peter Phillips, John Meredith and William McGinnis.

A new Wesleyan Chapel was opened in King Street, Leigh, in 1815; this drew a small part of the congregation from Lowton. But most of the former Wesleyans in the village had no wish to renew ties that had been broken in the way described. When they came to hear of Mr. Phillips and his colleagues, and the success of their Warrington venture, they determined to get in touch with them and ask for their advice. They already possessed a building in which services could still be held if only preachers could be found to conduct them, for that which they had formerly attended had by now been abandoned altogether by the Wesleyan Methodists.

A meeting was arranged between a deputation from Lowton and Mr. Phillips. He and his associates were only too pleased to offer their assistance, and in 1819 it was agreed that a group calling themselves Independent Methodists should begin to hold regular services in Lowton. These proved to be so very popular that the meeting-place was rapidly outgrown: in about 1834 it was therefore demolished, and a larger building erected on the site. But the congregation continued to increase in size, and by the mid-1840s it had once again become clear that the process must be repeated. A brief account of the problem involved, and of the way in which they were tackled, appears in a handbook printed in connection with

an 'Empire Bazaar' – a very ambitious enterprise, organised in Lowton by the Independent Methodists in the autumn of 1912. Its purpose was to launch yet another bout of fund-raising. The account, part of which reads as follows, was written by Joseph Hesford:

“... Eventually the Cause prospered so that a third school-chapel was required. This was a great undertaking for a number of people in such humble circumstances, but they were not the men to shrink from what seemed to be their real obligation. They agreed that it was time to pull down and rebuild, and the work commenced. Now a critical stage arrived; the old place was pulled down and there was some legal difficulty in the way. The late Mr. William Winstanley and a few others went to see a solicitor in Warrington, and on their return journey, which was on foot, they sat down to rest and to talk matters over, and there agreed to contribute £1 each, a respectable sum in those days. A gentleman promised to advance £100, which with other sums and the confidence they had in the sympathy of their neighbours, encouraged them to enter into a contract for the work. The gentleman referred to now applied for certain legal documents, which were not on their possession, and to their dismay he refused to find the £100, and they were left for a time hopeless in the work so dear to them. Walls were down and contracts entered into, and the work to be commenced the following morning.

“When all seemed to have come to a deadlock, another anxious meeting was held, on or near to the place of their beloved Zion. At this juncture a neighbour (who was not a member with them, but whose wife had attended the chapel), overhearing the conversation, promised to advance them £5, free of interest, and to give a fortnight's work. This gave rise to the idea of building the place in shares. The neighbourhood was canvassed, and some

took £1 shares, and others various sums up to £10 shares, some lending theirs free of interest; and that same day in this manner £150 was raised, and many people still living will remember a stone that was built in a conspicuous place in front of the edifice, with the following inscription:

‘Built in Shares and by Subscription, 1849.’”

Even this building turned out to be inadequate by the time another 25 years had passed, and a new site had to be found for the large chapel and school which by then were needed. The foundation stones of these, the present buildings, were laid on September 2nd, 1879. The material used was the dark red brick that is found all over that part of South Lancashire: it is exceptionally solid and durable. By the time they came to be inspected by the writer of the local newspaper article, he was able to assert with confidence that:

“Among the various Churches of Independent Methodists in Lancashire the foremost place must be assigned to Lowton... It has now an elegant chapel or church and schoolrooms with every appliance – school-master or mistress, classrooms, etc. etc. and these are well used. The pulpit is supplied with laymen from various parts of the county” (Joseph Hesford, my mother’s grandfather, was one lay preacher whose home was in Lowton), “and from some of the adjacent parts of Cheshire... the congregation is good, and the cause healthy and growing. Our Lowton friends believe in education, especially self-education and self-help. They have a good school library... a leading bookseller some years back told us that these Lowton Independent Methodists bought the most books and papers and that of a better kind than any similar institution in the locality – that they were, as he expressed it – a reading people.” They also had frequent meetings for the

purpose of discussing ideas prompted by the contents of the books they had been reading – not on the subject of religion only, but on the topical affairs of the day.

The buildings erected in 1879 had to be extended on two occasions, in 1895 and again in 1911. The extensions consisted of several additional classrooms, plus a kitchen equipped as Joseph Hesford puts it “with apparatus for carrying out various parties and entertainments incidental to Day and Sunday School life.” It was in order to help pay off the debt occurred in the most recent spate of building that the “Empire Bazaar” was held.

Sad to say, the decision was taken to demolish the school in 1993: it had stood empty, and had been left to decay over a period of several years, the Victorian premises having been abandoned as insufficiently ‘child-friendly’ for use in the late 20th century. In this day the I.M. School had enjoyed an excellent reputation; it had provided a mixed range of pupils, including my two sisters and myself, with an admirably sound basic education. I cannot believe that any who attended it were allowed to leave without being able at least to read and write their own language fluently, and to cope with straightforward arithmetic. Why should it be that so many modern schools seem to be incapable of achieving equivalent standards? Discipline was certainly stricter in our day: in class we were soon in trouble if we failed to pay attention to what was being taught. Boys who chose to be deliberately disruptive were sent to the headmaster, who administered ‘the cane’. (Some of those I remember thoroughly deserved it). But the regime was not at all oppressive for children who accepted the need for such measures. The little ones were eased especially gently into the strange, new experience of learning. We got to know the alphabet quickly – by singing it in unison; also we chanted our “times tables” – a process very much

frowned upon today, yet it helps to fix them in the mind for ever.

In order to illustrate everyday procedure as once practised in the infant's school, I am attaching as an Appendix a piece written by my grandmother in (I think) the very early 1900s, when my mother was a pupil there. As seemed appropriate at the time, she wrote in the Lancashire dialect.

The writer of the newspaper article of 1887, parts of which I have already quoted, was curious to see the Independent Methodists of Lowton at their worship; he therefore made a point of attending the chapel on the occasion of their "Sermons", a annual celebration always held on the third Sunday in May. He describes the events of the day as follows (as it is rather a lengthy account, I have picked out the principle points):

"They put in a full day and take time by the forelock ... In the morning at nine o'clock a service was held in the school, conducted by Mr. William guest, there being a good gathering." (Elsewhere it is explained that 'William Guest Esq.' was "a gentleman of the locality who worships at this church"). A collection was taken, amounting to £16. 8s. 9½ d. Then, "after the service a procession was formed, first going to Knotts Mill, where the good old hymn 'Praise ye the Lord, 'tis good to raise' etc. was sung heartily, after which they walked back" (along St. Helens Road, and) "through Lowton to Mather-lane, opposite to their venerable and esteemed brother, James Eckersley, where they sang for him his favourite hymn – 'A few more years shall roll' – and then returned back to the chapel." The writer adds that "this school-walking is an old custom, and our Lowton friends are not ashamed of the ways of their fathers and do not affect 'new fangles' in their work." The walking

continued still in the days when I attended the I.M. Chapel as a girl: in those days the procession was led rather grandly by a brass band. It also went further, making three stops rather than two for hymn-singing; everyone taking part in it would be dressed in a new Spring outfit, and many onlookers used to gather on the pavements along the prescribed route in order to see the parade go by.

[Mr. Eckersley's favourite hymn was written by one Horatius Bonar, about whom I know nothing other than the date of his birth, which was 1808. These are some of the verses:

A few more years shall roll,
A few more seasons come,
And we shall be with those that rest, -
Asleep within the tomb.

A few more suns shall set,
O'er these dark hills of time,
And we shall be where suns are not, -
A far serener clime.

.....

A few more struggles here,
A few more partings o'er,
A few more toils, a few more tears,
And we shall weep no more.

A few more Sabbaths here
Shall cheer us on our way;
And we shall reach the endless rest,
Th'eternal Sabbath-day.]

The children were allowed to return home after the procession returned to the chapel.

“Now for the glory of Lowton’s charity sermons. Our Lowton friends believe in the last psalm literally, for they ‘Praise God with the sound of the trumpet, praise Him with the psaltery and harp, praise Him with the stringed instrument and organ... ‘Dropping into the chapel in twos and threes are singers from Leigh, Tyldesley and more distant places – types of the old Lancashire chorus singers for which Lancashire has been famous for generations. Fiddles of all sizes – children, fathers, grandfathers, or double basses. The singing has always been a main feature of the Lowton ‘sermons’, and in building their new chapel they wisely provided a most capacious and commodious orchestra, which with their own staff and their outside help is well filled, but not oppressively crowded.”

[Here it may be worth making the point that in its early days Independent Methodism used to be referred to as ‘Quaker Methodism’! This term could no longer have been used to describe it in the 1880s! My daughter went to a Quaker school, and the impression she carried away from the services she and her friends attended under the school’s auspices was of a complete absence of music: she insists that most of the time was spent sitting in total silence – which, however, she did not mind, as at least it meant she wasn’t preached at!]

“The rehearsal takes place in the forenoon – Sunday school anthems of a light kind, choice hymn tunes of a suitable nature, and grand choruses from the great masters fill up the programme. The writer knows that some cynical musicians will smile superciliously at these great works being attempted by Sunday school amateurs. Let him smile. He forgets that although (they) may not be rendered as Halle could do them, yet a far more important work is being done by these people –

they are educating the people: they are making the staple which makes Halle's concerts a possibility. If there were no Sunday school musicians there would be no Halle concert, so smile away, my supercilious friend! Lowton musicians will generously pardon your contracted view of things in general, and music in particular.

"The rehearsal over, dinner in the cottages... Those who fancy that sober working men's cottages are hovels should go to Lowton... and dine with the people in their houses; there are no intoxicants in them – everything but the 'demon drink.'" [At this point the cutting is torn, but I think that the latter phrase is what the writer intended. I can also just make out the words "strict sobriety". After them the first line that is complete clearly refers to the type of conversation carried out in the houses between services: it reads: "intelligent, unconstrained chat, on things in general, and especially musical gossip."

"The service at 2.30 brought the congregation apparently from all parts of the compass. A full chapel, a full orchestra, violins as merry crickets, basses as grave as sages, everything as merry as a marriage bell."

The choir, it seems, was composed of 30 females, 9 males (tenor) 14 males (bass) and two males (alto). The organist was John Winstanley, and the orchestra was led by Richard Boydell.

The evening service drew a congregation so large that many could not get into the chapel:

"Inside the chapel, the vestries ... and every available inch was packed like a tin of sardines. The pulpit, or rostrum, was occupied by Mr. James Mort, of Lymm,

Cheshire. I need not add that he is a layman, for they have no other kind in their church.”

[Preachers whose home were in the Lowton area were not averse, for their part, to undertaking preaching commitments in Cheshire, and this long before the county boundary came to be adjusted. Then it coincided with the River Mersey, the very name of which means ‘boundary river’: it is believed that in the ‘dark ages’ it formed the important boundary between the kingdoms of Northumbria and Mercia. In the days before the coming of the railways, preachers had to make these journeys on foot – but they did not let the prospect deter them, for they felt it to be their bounden duty to spread the gospel far and wide, no matter what the inconvenience. Joseph Hesford often preached in Cheshire chapels; as he came from Croft, and had family living there, I imagine that he would have called in at one or other of his relatives’ houses there for a brief rest, to break the journey.]

“I am afraid to say all I think about the preaching, for if I did I should be suspected of being either criminally partial or else a doting fool. But at this risk I will say, that I have not for a long while back heard such intellectual, forceful sermons. Mr. Mort is what some would call uneducated... he is not learned in the jargon of the schools, ... but in the rich feast which he provides, you only see his clear and well-stocked table, and forget about the dish in which it is served... We shall never forget his apt and his intelligent explanation of natural life as contradistinguished from spiritual life. Mr. Mort is a botanist and a naturalist of no common order. He understands whereof he speaks, and those who heard his disquisition on the text ‘All flesh is grass and the glory of man as the flower of grass’ will nit soon forget his fine exposition of natural life – generated life – and spiritual life, ‘re-generated life’. As a gentleman of

fine classical and scientific attainments said to me when leaving the chapel, 'We have had a fine intellectual treat tonight', and so would everyone in the congregation say, if he had any brains. If he had only a frosted turnip on his shoulders, he might say differently."

It seems that the collections for that day amounted in all to over £61: a very large sum for a village chapel to receive in a day in the 1880s. Finally, the writer records for us the fact that the number of 'scholars' then attending the Sunday School was approximately 280; in the day school there were 150, shared between a staff of 5 teachers.

Anyone who supposes that the Independent Methodists of those days were dreary, sanctimonious creatures should take careful note of this eye-witness account of their May festivities. Nor should they be believed to have been simple-minded zealots of the type the early evangelists had in mind. Activities they frowned upon were theatre-going, gambling, and of course the drinking of alcohol, all of which were liable to lead people astray. But Independent Methodists had little time to spare for such frivolous pursuits: they led a busy social life, centred upon the Chapel; and to occupy the odd solitary moment they had a supply of books to read. At Lowton they possessed their own library in the school. This contained a good selection of titles, appealing to most contemporary tastes. There were popular novels as well as works of non-fiction upon their shelves, for light reading was considered harmless as long as its content was not of a sort to offend Victorian morality. When it came to weightier matters, a bombshell like 'The Origin of Species' would have been read and studied with great curiosity, then discussed and very probably ridiculed. Certainly, however, it would not have been banned.

The movement had its adversaries as well as its supporters in the village. The first vicar appointed to the Lowton St. Mary's living – the Rev. James William Smart Simpson – was no friend to the Independent Methodists. As Richard Ridyard explains, in his 'Memories of Lowton':

"From the time St. Mary's Church was built and Mr. Simpson appointed... there had always existed a feeling of jealousy between the Chapel and Church members. This feeling was further embittered by a most regrettable incident of which I was an eye-witness.

"At the commencement of the above year (1880), a new Burials Act had become law, making it legal for Nonconformist ministers to conduct a burial service in the Parish Church Yard. While the bulk of the Church of England clergy were disposed to carry out the new law, there were here and there others who were determined to make the new Act as little advantageous to the Nonconformists as possible. The minister of St. Mary's Church was one of these, but as will be seen from the following statement of facts, he was beaten by the Methodists... The facts of the case are that Mr. Simon Boydell, who at the time was superintendent of the Methodist Sunday School, had a son died, and owning a grave in St. Mary's Churchyard, he decided that the remains of his son should be buried beside those of two other of his children.

"In accordance with the requirements of the Act, Mr. Boydell took a written notice to the Vicar, informing him of his intention to ask Mr. James Eckersley to officiate at the Church. The Vicar objected to the interment taking place, and the following notice was sent to Mr. Boydell...

'I, J.W.S.Simpson, M.A., Vicar of St. Mary's Church, Lowton, do hereby give you notice that I object to the

interment of your son, Edwin Boydell, taking place in St. Mary's Church Yard, Lowton, excepting to the rites of the Church of England, any other manner of interment in this case being contrary to Section G of the Burial Laws Amendment Act, 1880.'

"In reply, Mr. Boydell sent a letter intimating that he had arranged with Mr. Eckersley to officiate, adding that he had been advised (that) the Burials Act allowed it. Regardless of the Vicar's protest, the funeral was fixed for four o'clock in the afternoon of November 11th. As the day wore on there were no signs of a grave being dug, and the public were excluded from the church yard by the gates being fastened by chain and padlock. At three o'clock the funeral procession left the house of Mr. Boydell for a preliminary service to be held in the Methodist Chapel, the coffin being carried on the shoulders of four men.

"A crowd of several hundred men, women and children had assembled in the Lane, near the Church gates, the number being augmented as the burial time drew near by people from Leigh and surrounding districts. Among the gentlemen from Leigh were J. T. Hayes Esq., the Rev. Wm. Karfoot, Congregational Minister, the Rev. J. Hall, Primitive Methodist, and many others whom I recognised. At the close of the service in the Chapel, the funeral procession re-formed, and wended its way to the Church gates, which were found to be locked, the coffin (then) being rested on four chairs. Before many minutes had elapsed, Mr. J. H. Nichols, of Sandfield House, Lowton, the Vicar's Warden, drove up in his carriage. He met the Vicar in the Church yard, where for a few minutes they had an animated conversation. Ultimately the Vicar approached the gate, and addressing Mr. Boydell, said, 'the new Act did not allow the burial of a non-parishioner.'"

Mr. Boydell lived, in fact, near Aspull Common, and his home was therefore in Pennington. His other two children, who had died before 1880, however, had been buried in Lowton St. Mary's Churchyard – and no objection had then been made. The Vicar was attempting to make use of a loophole in the new Burials Act, which he hoped would serve as a pretext to enable him to prevent a Nonconformist preacher from officiating now at the graveside ceremony. Mr. Ridyard continues:

Mr J. T. Hayes and Mr. Karfoot addressed observations to the Vicar, and his retort that he would speak only to Mr. Boydell elicited an answer (loudly applauded by the onlookers) that he was pitted against the Nonconformists of England. The Vicar and his warden again consulted, and finally a promise was made that the gates would be opened at 5 o'clock, and in the meantime a grave would be dug. The coffin was taken back into the Chapel, and Mr. Karfoot addressed a crowded audience in the schoolroom, advising moderation, as it was known that there were men in the crowd with tools and appliances to smash open the gates. At five o'clock the gates were opened and the coffin brought from the Chapel a second time, and was interred with the aid of oil lamps, Mr. Eckersley officiating."

The affair excited considerable interest, both locally and nationally. Mr. Ridyard prints the following extracts from some of the comments which appeared in newspapers at the time:

From the 'Manchester Guardian': "It is not surprising, perhaps, that those of (the clergy) who regard the Burials Act as a measure of sacrilege and confiscation should desire to keep a firm hold on what privileges have been left to them. It may be asked, however, whether it is the

part of prudence, to speak of nothing higher, to push their pretensions as they have been pushed in this instance.”

From the rather more outspoken ‘Manchester Examiner and Times’: “It passes understanding why clergymen should insist, at the cost of discord and disorder, in thrusting the liturgy of the Church upon people who object to it on conscientious grounds... If Mr. Simpson is not already ashamed of his behaviour, it may be assumed that he has some cooler-headed friends who will point out to him that he has most to lose by taking steps which must bring his extraordinary behaviour again into public notice.”

The opinions of other people do not seem, however, greatly to have influenced the vicar. He continued invariably to raise “foolish objections” to the performance of burial-rites by Nonconformist ministers. Each time he did so he was forced in the end to give way, but each time this happened the ill-feeling between the two sides was further increased. Eventually he resigned the living, and was replaced by a man prepared to display more sympathy towards the feelings of members of other denomination within his parish. Mr. Ridyard assures that “ever since Mr. Simpson’s departure from the district, a more charitable spirit has prevailed between the two religious bodies.” Perhaps this explains why, when Simon Boydell himself died in 1916, the funeral service in Chapel was taken by Joseph Hesford, but the grave-side ceremony was conducted by the then vicar of Lowton St. Mary’s, the Rev. Francis Smith – of whom, one infers, Mr. Boydell must have approved.

The paragraph that follows has been added as a matter of interest by the editor in 2007 and was taken from the history of St. Mary’s Church.

In 1955 the Trustees of Lowton Independent Methodist Chapel very generously made a gift of a twelve yard strip of land parallel to the churchyard to be used as an extension to the graveyard. This land was consecrated by the Bishop of Warrington on the 25th May, 1983 and is now in use.

As I have already explained, both my grandfathers belonged to families which had remained faithful to the Church of England, but both readily “changed their religion” upon marrying Independent Methodist wives. Although Peter Cleworth’s ancestors had been farmers, he was employed in an iron foundry until, in the 1890s, there was a severe recession in trade, which led to his being made redundant. Having by then a wife and a daughter to provide for, he was determined to find work of some description; therefore, he set out to walk in search of it. He was unsuccessful until he reached Portsmouth, where he secured employment in one of the dockyards. Martha, his wife, went to join him there, but was unhappy, and unable to settle: she missed her friends and relatives in Lowton. As soon as the recession was over, and work became available in Leigh, the couple returned, found a house in Pennington, and remained there permanently. Neither was to live a long life, however, for Martha was only 41 when she died; Peter survived her by just four years, his death taking place in 1916. From then until the time of her marriage, my mother – their only child – lived with her Hesford grandparents.

John Henry Talbot, born in 1871 (and baptised at St. Luke’s Church, Lowton), was put to work by his stepfather in a coal mine when he was 12 years old; until he was well into his thirties there was no public transport available to facilitate the daily journey to and from his place of work. Miners whose homes were in Lowton Common walked to work at Bickershaw Colliery, making use of footpaths

which led through the fields. Winters in the latter years of the 19th century tended, for the most part, to be extremely harsh, and whereas on a sunny morning in spring or summer the fresh air and exercise may have been welcome, it must have been a nightmarish experience for them to have to trudge there in the dark, battling their way through snow-storms or attempting to negotiate treacherous, icy surfaces. Even in summer there were hazards to be faced: one local farmer was in the habit of allowing his bull to roam freely in its pasture, and it often amused itself by charging at anyone who entered its domain. I have heard it said that it was not unknown for some of the Moseley Farm bull's victims to seek escape by jumping into the Flash! Then, on arrival at the colliery, the men had to crawl through long, low tunnels in order to reach the coal face, where they were expected to labour for hours, their only tools being the pick and shovel. Many years would pass before machinery was brought in to facilitate the cutting of the coal.



My father was John Henry Talbot's eldest son, born in March 1896. He attended the Independent Methodist School, and from there went on to the grammar school in Leigh. Luckily for him, he was able to travel there in reasonable comfort, for by the time he began to attend, trams were running from Lowton to Leigh. In those days the school was co-educational: only at a later date were

the sexes separated, girls going to the purpose-built premises for them in Windermere Road. Part of their playground was laid out on land that had formerly belonged to the Cleworth's farm. My mother, too, attended the Grammar School: her best subjects were languages and music, and I still have some of the prizes she won there. She played the piano, and also the organ: for a time she was the Chapel organist.



Leigh Girls Grammar School
Possibly to be demolished in 2007

Like so many of his 19th century ancestors, my father became involved in work connected with the textile industry. He left school at the age of 14, very much against the advice of the headmaster, who regarded him as “university material”. As the eldest son of a family of 4 (plus other children, who died in infancy) he felt strongly that it was his duty to make a contribution to the income of the household. Miners’ wages were pitifully low, and whenever stocks of coal were in surplus, the men were laid off for indefinite periods. My grandmother was an excellent manager, but she always had to ‘scrimp and scrape’ in order to feed and clothe her children, and my father could not bear to let this continue once he was old enough to bring in some earnings. After an unsatisfactory start, in a job in which he was very unhappy, he obtained a post as a clerk in the office of the weaving mill in Bedford (Leigh) which was owned by the firm of Courtaulds.

They had come to Leigh in 1898, acquiring Brook Mill from Samuel Brown and Company. All their activities previously had been confined to the county of Essex, where for a period of more than 70 years they had carried on a flourishing trade which, however, had been very specialised: they had manufactured mourning crapes, which had been much in demand throughout Queen Victoria's reign. In 1889 they had for the first time made the decision to diversify, and to produce other types of silk fabrics like crepe-de-chine, silk-chiffon, etc. These ventures proved to be so successful that they were able to expand the business rapidly. Brook Mill was the first of their factories to be set up outside East Anglia. By the time they came to acquire it they had begun to make tentative experiments in the manufacture of what was then referred to as "artificial silk". The raw material from which it was made consisted of cellulose, in the form of wood-pulp, imported from Canada and Scandinavia. The firm decided in 1906 to construct a factory which was to concentrate solely on producing yarn from this source. It was built in Coventry, but Brook Mill in Leigh was one of those to which the yarn was sent for final processing, and for weaving into cloth. Courtaulds became the first firm in the world to make a commercial success of the new fabric, which was given the name 'rayon'.

In 1910 the firm commenced operations on the opposite side of the Atlantic, founding what was at a later date to be the American Viscose Corporation. Further expansion took place elsewhere also, and in order to increase production in Leigh, Courtaulds took over Bedford New Mill, which had been owned by Jones Bros. Limited. Meanwhile, however, my father's career had been interrupted by the outbreak of war. He enlisted towards the end of 1914, and served in the Royal Field Artillery. He was wounded twice in 1916, in the conflict now known to history as the notorious Battle of the Somme. After

spending several months in hospital, he made enough of a recovery to be sent back to France in the spring of 1918, this time in charge of an anti-aircraft unit. He survived without incurring further injury until the Armistice was signed in November 1918.

He was lucky to have a job to return to: after the war there was mass unemployment, and returning servicemen who were unable to find work suffered a great deal of hardship. The firm of Courtaulds was fortunately prospering, and my father was determined to make the best of whatever opportunities came his way. The hours of work were very long – from early morning to 6p.m., plus Saturday mornings, but he decided to attend evening classes, and for this purpose he had to travel to Bolton. His perseverance was rewarded by the attainments of qualifications which impressed his employers; in the early 1930s he became manager of Bedford New Mill.

His contribution to the next 'war effort' in the years 1939-1945 involved organising a complete switch-over from the making of fabrics for the domestic market to that for materials required for use by the armed forces. Parachute silk, for example, was manufactured in large quantities at Bedford New Mill during that war. A system of working in shifts was initiated, so that production could be continuous. After 1945 everything changed again; there were a few years of high prosperity, but hard times already loomed on the horizon.

The impending closure of the mill was announced in the press in 1982 – just a few weeks after my father had died. By a strange chance the presence of Courtaulds as employers of labour in Leigh had lasted for a period that coincided with his lifetime. He had retired in the late 1950s, but had continued to take a keen interest in the firm and in its tribulations. It had been largely the arrival on

the scene of cheap imported fabrics which had helped to kill the textile trade in Lancashire, though the demands of the militant unions had been so unreasonable, and so impossible to meet, that they must be held partly responsible. Few people will pay high prices for goods that are labelled 'made in England' when they have the option of choosing alternatives which seem identical, and also cheaper. The workforce priced itself out of the market, and is now being forced to take the consequences.