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# **LOWTON**

## **INDEPENDENT METHODIST CHURCH**

There were at one time two Independent Methodist meeting places in Lowton the present church located at Lowton Saint Mary's and referred to as Lowton Common. This church you will read below came about when the people there defected from the Wesleyans in 1819.

The other cause was older. We believe that a James Ashton born in 1774, started to hold cottage meetings in his cottage on Church Lane opposite Saint Luke's Church, how his meetings became associated with the Independent Methodists is not known, but it certainly happened no later than 1815 and possibly much earlier. There was a lot of Independent Methodist activity in the area at the time and as well as Lowton there were meetings at Croft and Risley, it is interesting to note that there are still meetings in all these places. James Ashton is known to have preached at the present church after it joined the Connexion.

The attendance at Ashton's meetings became predominantly people from Golborne and eventually the people wanted to relocate to Golborne but Ashton was reluctant to loose his meeting. The people took matters into their own hands and opened their first Golborne Church in 1847, the third Golborne Church now closed still stands in the centre of High Street built in front of the second church. The meetings at Ashton's cottage continued until he died in 1859.

I order to help with our research into the development of the Independent Methodist Churches in Lowton and Golborne. We are interested in locating a photograph of the cottages that were in Church Lane, in the vicinity of the former Beech House this was located approximately in the region of the new Co-op store. Also any descendants of the James Ashton mentioned.

In "A short history of Independent Methodism" published in 1905 James Ashton is referred to as a pioneer of Independent Methodism in the Lowton Area, in the section dealing with Lowton Common the present IM church.

The Independent Methodist Magazine for 1908 States that the cottage of James Ashton was still standing but we believe that it has long since been demolished.

There are some interesting facts about James Ashton's ministry and his clashes with the established church and we hope to add these in the future.

If you can help with any photographs please e-mail [webmaster@lowtonimchurch.org.uk](mailto:webmaster@lowtonimchurch.org.uk)

## **A SHORT HISTORY**

This is a reprint of the section dealing with the Independent Methodist Church at Lowton, taken from the book *Memories of Lowton*, by Richard Ridyard that was published in 1935. The Ridyard family were worshipers at this Church. The complete book has been reprinted at least three times the last time an edited version was produced in 1963 by P & D Riley but is once again out of print. Other books on the history of Lowton have been produced by local farmer Bert Worsley but again all of Bert's books are now out of print. At the present time all the books mentioned are available from the Golborne and Leigh libraries.

**LOWTON COMMON METHODIST:** The inhabitants of Lowton Common have long been known for their sturdy Puritanism and Nonconformity, and as far back as 1642, during the civil war, we find some of the villagers taking part in a fight between the Puritan and Loyalist forces. It is recorded that one Sunday morning, during the Winter of the above year, Lord Strange, Seventh Earl of Derby, was marching towards Bolton at the head of his Loyalist troops. About one o'clock they arrived in the vicinity of Chowbent, where they were met by more than three thousand young men, hastily summoned. comprising framers, wheelwrights, weavers, nailmakers, and rustics from the surrounding districts, who attacked the Loyalists, and drove them back through Leigh towards Lowton. The horsemen, more bold than cautious, out rode the men on foot, and sustained a temporary loss on Lowton Common. However, when the men on foot arrived the battle was turned in their favour, and about two hundred of the Loyalist forces were killed and the rest disarmed and made prisoners. That many horses were also killed during the battle. and were buried near to where Knott's Mill now stands is given colour by the great number of horse shoes found some years ago, during some excavating operations in that area.

With an ancestry who were prepared to fight and die if need be for the cause of religious and civil liberty, it is not surprising that Methodism should appeal to the spiritual nature of many of the villagers and it is known that Methodist meetings were held in cottages as far back as 1780. Which section of Methodism or Nonconformity was the first to hold cottage meetings, I have not been able to ascertain. but during the

later portion of the 18th century, meetings were held in one of the three cottages which are still standing in Lowton Hall fold. From information I have been able to obtain, I conclude the worshippers were believers in adult baptism by immersion, as there is a well founded tradition, that in a stream of water running near by the cottages. there used to be a small square reservoir, a few feet deep, the bottom and sides of which were made of blocks of stone. Resting on the coping stones were rough hewn images of angels and churches. which after the dissolution of the sect, went to adorn the rockeries in the local cottage gardens.

Another meeting place for worship in these early times was the granary attached to Yew Tree farm. and I learn that only a few years ago. the original oak reading desk was broken up for fire wood by the tenant farmer. To which section of Nonconformity these religious enthusiasts belonged no one knows, but there is authentic history of the Wesleyans holding meetings about 1720. in the house known as Gilded Hollins farm, which still stands opposite Knott's Houses, St. Helens Road. In course of time it was decided to build a school chapel. and a Mr. Richard Eckersley, who owned some land on Lowton Common. gave the land on which it was erected. and opened in 1794. The building was used as a day school. Sunday school. and also for holding preaching services. The first schoolmaster was a Mr. Peter Eckersley.

For a time the cause must have prospered for according to an old Hymn Sheet, dated 1810. the scholars attached to the Sunday School numbered 200. A footnote on the Hymn Sheet reads as follows :? "In this school there are upwards of 200 scholars taught to read every Lord's Day. The amount of collections and donations last year was ?6 9s. 0d. That our pecuniary assistance is insufficient must be obvious to everyone who considers that the above sum is on the aver age 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. After mature deliberation we could not but think of a plan so calculated to supply our wants as that now proposed, and we flatter ourselves it will? meet with the cordial approbation of every lover of mankind, whom we once more solicit liberally to impart all possible help in sup port of the institution."

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. As an old Lowtonian, knowing something of the temperament of the villagers of 50 or 60 years ago, I can well imagine the spirit in which so dictatorial a document would be received by the older generation of inhabitants. To demand the payment of a silver coin before being allowed to enter his place of worship. and then be expected to contribute at the close of the sermon, would be anathema to the then sturdy independence of the average Lowtonian. From that time disputings began among the congregation, and in the course of a few years the members had dwindled down to six, and strange to say they were all named Eckersley. The cause almost died out. through not being able to get regular supplies of preachers and workers, and often the place would be closed for several weeks at a time.

That the meagre financial assistance could not be attributed to the niggardly nature of the natives, is evidenced by the large amount of money subscribed by them in succeeding years. and the cause of the trouble can only be surmised. On the fundamentals of doctrine there was little difference between the contending parties. and I am of the opinion that the trouble was more a question of management. and the belief of the Lowtonians that all efforts to propagate the Gospel. or working for the Lord, as they would term it, should be a labour of love, spontaneously rendered. without thought of any financial reward. whereas the Wesleyans believed in a paid ministry, etc.

Be this as it may, it is in this spirit and belief that Independent Methodism. at Lowton Common has grown from one success to another during the past one hundred years. Immediately after the few remaining Wesleyans had left the place in the hands of their stronger rivals. a new cause was started under the name of Independent Quaker Methodists. In a short time it became necessary to build a larger place, so the old place was pulled down and a larger School Chapel built, and opened in the year 1834, "for children of all Denominations." The cause prospered so much that a third place had to be built, and this was opened in November, 1849, the collection for the day being over £20. A very considerable sum to raise in those days.

In my infancy I was baptised in the above building, and up to the time of it being vacated. I regularly attended the Sunday School and preaching services held therein. The cause so prospered that the Trustees decided to build a larger chapel and school, and they were fortunate in securing a piece of land near by the old place for ?200, on which the present commodious chapel and school were erected, at a cost of about ?5,000, and opened on March 26th, 1880. I was present at the laying of the foundation stones, and also at the opening of the premises, and was married at the Chapel 49 years ago.

None of the pioneers of Lowton Common Methodism were educated men, as education is usually understood, but they undoubtedly possessed wisdom, and a zealous faith in their mission. Some of their names I shall never forget. such as: James Eckersley, William Winstanley, Richard Collier, James Ince, Simon Boydey, John Boydey, Joseph Birchall Joseph Hesford, and my grandfather, Joshua Ridyard, who, when I was quite young, led me to the Sunday School, where he taught a class of very young boys, always referred to as the "Reedy mid aisey class", because of the title of the book from which they were taught to read being "Reading Made Easy". Some of these men were preachers, and much of their speech was in the local vernacular, and very quaint it would sound if heard from a pulpit to-day.

James Eckersley was a descendant of an old Lowton family, and he began preaching, when only sixteen years of age, and he often had stones and other missiles thrown at him when holding open-air meetings, but undaunted he held on. and many of those who had been opposed to him became changed men, through the influence of his precepts and example. Although he was a member of the Primitive Methodist Chapel. Lane Head, he often preached at Lowton Common Chapel on a Sunday morning. He was a great favourite with the boys who attended the service, partly on account of his quaint sayings. but principally because of his brevity in conducting the service. If we saw him walking in the direction of the Chapel. one of the lads would approach him and say, "Are yo pretchen. Jemmv". his answer would invariably be, "Ave an al not keep yo lung if vo?ll promise bi good lads". Of course the promise was readily given, but whether it was always kept. I have my doubts. True to his side of the bargain he would

suddenly cut short the service about half an hour before the usual time: and exclaim. "Ah con see th?lads are genen tyart. so al gie oer, and let urn go whom to their dumplins".

I remember an occasion when several young men of the village thought they would frighten him one dark Sunday night, when he was returning home across the fields from Golborne, where he had been the preacher for the day. They agreed to hide in the hedges. and on his approach one of them should meet him, after making himself look as weird and ghost-like as possible by enveloping himself in a white sheet. When they heard the old gentleman?s footsteps coming along the foot path. the ghost left its hiding place and met him face to face. The old man never changed his pace. but on passing the ghost, quietly said: "If thert dival theu cawnt hurt me. and if thert human. God al not let thi touch me". If the faith of old James could not literally remove mountains, it certainly removed from the hearts of those young men all desire ever to play the ghost on him again.

The late Mr. T. L Travers in his book of Manuscript, dated December 19th, 1888. records as follows:?"Curious sayings and doings of old James Eckersley, of Lowton. a well-known and highly respected local preacher. A man very well versed in Scripture, and who at times could pray and preach as one inspired.. His Gospel was love of God and his fellow creatures. A most innocent and unworldly man, who all his life went about doing good. Never-the-less he was erratic and highly eccentric, his speeches occas ionally bordering on the most startling themes. He is still living, being 85 years oi age. and wonderfully active at the time these lines were written". I once heard him say from the pulpit that if he had had twenty lads, he would make them serve the Lord or he "would breke ther yeads"; well, he has three sons, who have followed in their father?s footsteps.

At one time describing the glories of heaven, he said, "There would be mountains o dumplins an rivers o broth, and?th women woula have a rare time on?t as ther would bi no dolly tubs nur washin beillers waiten fur urn on a Monday mornin". On another occasion he said he would like to see all his neighbours, and all that he had known, to be saved, and if he had the power he would "slek hell-fire eaut". One time he was holding forth and a man near the pulpit was nodding, where. upon old

James. tapping him on the head, said, "Wakken up. Ruffley, thers a creawn o?glory wainn fur thee in heaven if theu has a bawd yead?..

Being in his company once, and a young lady being present. he turned to her and said. "Ah tell thi what, wench. thi fevther owds some quare notions abeaut heaven. He thinks thoos ut ur saved al bi flyin abeaut wi angels, seem th wonders oth universe, an travelin fro one Orb tut tother. Ah tell thi what ast think it strange when I?m i heaven if ah see thi fevther whizzin past hooked on to a comet?s tail".

Conversation overheard. October, 1889. between two old Lowton celebrities, both being rather deaf. one aged 85 and the other 75. J. Eckerslev: ?Did?t go to?t Chappil Anniversary o Sunday;? R. Collier: ?Aye?. J. Eckersiev: ?What wur Mawt (Mort) pretchin abeawt??

R. Collier: ?Well, he wur quite Apastolic like, he gan us a deol o Schripther. an he startet othe beginin an finished off athe eendin he gan us o text, but rawnt abeawt o good deol. Ah should like furt year him again, for he gan mi o deol o comfort in mi yead?.

Old Penks? (Penkethman) account Of Bishop Ryles? Sermon at St. Mary?s Church, Lowton, 1890.

"Hes one othe reet soart o passons. He didn?t daily but went reet at his wark. an he didn?t begin furt exalt his-sel nor howd up? th sacriments for salvation. Nowt but plain straight forrud tawk, an when eed dun he gan o?er beawt anny moor bother".

Mr. Penkethman was a staunch supporter of Independent Method ism and lived at Lowton Hall Farm. where he died about 40 years ago. I used to hay-make for him during my school holidays, and I remember he was strongly opposed to Sunday haymaking. On one occasion his principles cost him dearly, for on a Saturday evening in July, 1872 after a period of fine weather, he had a twelve acre field of hay ready for being stacked. The workmen, afraid the weather might break expressed a wish to stack it on the following day, Sunday. Mr. Penkethman was against the suggestion, declaring he had never allowed haymaking on the Sabbath day, and he never would. The Sunday was fine until late afternoon, when a thunder storm came on, and it rained, as it had never in living memory done before or since. A larger area of land was flooded

than has ever been known, and the weather never really picking up for some weeks, the hay was spoilt, and made only fit for bedding the cattle, or the manure heap.

The men said the man was a fool for not taking advantage of the fine Sunday, but Mr. Penkethman had the satisfaction of knowing that he had kept the Sabbath day holy, and as a good Methodist would no doubt console himself with the thought that his earthly loss would be to his eternal gain.

Richard Collier was a prominent member of the Chapel. and a local preacher, and as such he christened me when I was a child.

Mr. Ruffley. when a young man, had been one of the worst characters in the village, but through the influence of the Chapel he became a reformed man, and faithfully attended the services until his death. I remember him once telling his religious experiences, and with fervour portraying the "glory of heaven, with its beautiful mansions, one of which was reserved for him, its streets paved with gold. and no hungry bellies there, furt neawdding mugs. wud bi runnin o'er wi dowf".

Mr. James Mort was considered to be one of the best preachers connected with the Independent Methodist. and hailed from Lymm? where he worked on the highway. He was in great demand for preaching Anniversary sermons, and having studied Botany, he always chose a text bearing on the subject. such as:?"Consider the lillies of the field", or "The grass withereth. etc". He would begin his discourse by outlining the science of plant life, and vegetable kingdom. and then give it a spiritual meaning. This he could do exceedingly well, and he was undoubtedly a good and intelligent preacher.

Although I have wandered far theologically from the Methodist fold since my young days. it is with gratitude that I acknowledge my indebtedness to these pioneers of Lowton Methodism. most of whom were old men when I was a boy, for their instruction and good advice, in trying to make me, as they would say, into a good lad.

Richard Ridyard 1935

Reproduced from the Short History of Independent Methodism, published in 1905 as a souvenir of the hundredth Annual Meeting of I.M. Churches.

## **LOWTON COMMON**

In trying to ascertain the commencement of Methodism at Lowton Common we go back more than a century. Prior to 1794 there was a small society formed by the Wesleyans. and meetings held in cottage houses. After a time it was agreed to try and get a school, and a Mr. Eckersley, who owned some land on Lowton Common, gave a plot, on which a School was built. This was opened as a Wesleyan school in the year 1794 The place was afterwards used, for day school, Sunday school, and preaching services. Unfortunately, the cause almost died out, owing to its being unable to get a regular supply of ministers and workers. The condition of things became so low that there were no preaching services held for three or four weeks at a time. This state of things gave much anxiety and regret, and a number of those residing in the neighbourhood conferred together and tried to raise another cause. They took possession of the premises, which created some bitter feeling between the few remaining Wesleyans and the new comers, but the latter became the stronger party, and after a time the Wesleyans left the place in the hands of their rivals. The next step they took was to consult with Peter Phillips, of Warrington who promised to preach and help them. Thus the cause was again started under the name of Independent or Quaker Methodists, and a supply of ministers arranged for the services.

Shortly after this it became necessary to build a larger place. The old building was taken down and a more convenient school erected, which was opened in the year 1834, for children of all denominations. The following are the names of some of the pioneers of Independent Methodism at Lowton Common. Preachers : James Ashton,

James Eckersley, John Chisnall, Jeremiah Collier, Jephtha Thompson, William Birchall, and others. Sunday school superintendents, teachers, etc.: Thomas Lowe, Abel Gregson, Richard Atherton, John Bridge, Thomas Cook, Robert Battersby, Joshua Ridyard, John Bent, William

Winstanley and William Smith. Eventually the cause prospered, so much so that a third school-chapel had to be built. This was completed and opened in November, 1849, by our late respected friends William Sanderson and James Gandy. The collections for the day amounted to £70 a very large sum to raise at that time. Since the above place was opened the work has so prospered and grown that the trustees had to look out for more land on which to erect chapel and schools. They were very fortunate in securing a site near the old place for the sum of £200, on which a commodious chapel and schools have been built, the total cost being nearly £4,000. These buildings were opened on March 26th, 1880.

