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The Baptists in Crewe, 1840-1940

AMONGST the small cluster of Baptist churches in South Cheshire is the pair at Crewe, neither of which can trace its origins further than the appearance of the town in the 1840s. Crewe was an industrial colony in the agricultural heartland of Cheshire and has remained an urban cuckoo in a rural nest. The coming of religious dissent in the ecclesiastical parish of Coppenhall (upon which Crewe was based) accompanied the building of the Grand Junction Railway Company's Repair Depot upon the northern bank of the River Waldron in 1842-3. A wide range of religious services was soon available in the area solely because the artisans who trekked into the new town seeking employment brought their religious beliefs with them.

This was distinctly true of the Baptist witness, for until the settlement in Crewe in 1843 the only Baptist causes in the immediate vicinity were at Wheelock and Nantwich, but that at Nantwich was moribund by the time the first preaching had begun in the new town.¹ This was in 1845 when Allan Priest (a cabinet maker and builder, who moved into Crewe the previous year) gathered five people into his home for Baptist worship. This embryonic Baptist church, which soon outgrew Priest's house, was allowed to use Christ Church school-room until the early months of 1849 when the congregation, which had grown to about thirty persons, was rehoused in more suitable premises in Victoria Street.² It was also in 1849 that the Rev. Richard Pedley of Wheelock conducted the proceedings which united five men and five women from this congregation into the first Baptist church in Crewe.³ Three months later five more persons were baptised and received into membership by Peter Swinton.⁴ By 1856 the congregation had risen to around 125 and a chapel (the first Baptist building in Crewe) was opened by the Rev. Hugh Stowell Brown. This unpretentious building, little more than a mission hall, held 200 persons and was used during the week as a day school but this experiment, the first of the Baptists' excursions into education, did not last long. The small dimensions of the new town of Crewe can be gauged by the fact that although this building was only about 200 yards from the Market Square it was situated in the middle of a field and had to be approached with trepidation in wet weather.⁵

So great was the demand for labour from the Railway Workshops that the population of the town rose from 4,571 in 1851 to 8,159 in 1861, soaring to 17,810, ten years later. Much of the new population was housed north-west of the Market Square in the streets that were springing up in that area. Crewe's rapid growth may be attributed to the establishment of a steel making plant and the concentration of locomotive manufacture in the new town. Naturally, the Baptists were able to garner for their cause some of the migrants flooding into the

town though they were less successful in doing so than the Primitive Methodists. The small Baptist chapel opened in 1856 was closed four years later and a new, more grandiose, structure, seating about 500 and costing around £900, was built in Victoria Street.⁶

The second Baptist church in the town appeared, not on account of militant evangelism, but because of an internecine struggle in the Victoria Street church between the minister, the Rev. W. J. Reade, and a segment of the membership. In this expansion through schism Crewe was typical of many north-western Baptist churches, as Dr. Lea has pointed out.⁷ This new church, formed when Reade led the dissidents away from Victoria Street, eventually built a chapel in Oak Street in 1865, at a cost of £1,300, which was opened by Richard Pedley of Wheelock. Unfortunately its life was not long, for history repeated itself in 1867 with another dispute between Reade and his new flock, and this signalled the beginning of the end. The premises were officially closed in 1871 by which time most of the membership had returned to Victoria Street.⁸ Membership of the parent church increased from seventy-one in 1869 to 136 two years later—a rate of increase never surpassed in the church's history. By 1871, 0.76 per cent of Crewe's population were members of the Baptist denomination, a percentage which fell as the century wore on.

The death of Richard Pedley of Wheelock in 1871 robbed the Baptist cause in Cheshire of one of its stalwarts; he had worked assiduously to extend the denomination and to increase temperance within the orbit of his travels. His son, also named Richard, born in 1828, soon became prominent in both the religious and political life of Crewe. At various times he was treasurer of the local Liberal Party, Moderator of the Lancashire and Cheshire Baptist Association, Borough Councillor, magistrate and temperance propagandist. Very few of Crewe's institutions did not feel the influence and energy of the younger Pedley, who had signed the pledge when he was only seven. The Baptist cause in Crewe received into fellowship its most illustrious and notable member in 1877. He was a young doctor of medicine, William Hodgson of Birkenhead, who settled in the town in that year. A man of wide and diverse interests, a splendid orator and singer, Hodgson was head and shoulders above the rest of Crewe's public men. Despite his tremendous prestige and undoubted ability he never allowed his presence at the local Baptist church to overawe or intimidate others. Willing to sing or preach at services, he was not a mere figurehead in the church and in 1883 he served as Moderator of the Lancashire and Cheshire Baptist Association. His public services were recognized by the award of a knighthood in the 1921 New Year's Honours List.

In 1882 a General Baptist Church was opened in the south of the town, at Union Street. It was not the result of an evangelistic mission from Victoria Street; indeed that church provoked the comment from the *General Baptist Magazine*: "Members of our denomination drift there and find no home."⁹ The church in Union Street was intended to provide such a home. Although it was founded without any major

dispute with the Particular Baptists of Victoria Street there was undoubtedly some friction, since all the Union Street baptisms were performed at Wheelock Heath, some five miles distant, rather than at nearby Victoria Street. In the autumn of 1884 a chapel accommodating 640 persons was opened by the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon. It had cost £3,000 to build and, although half the cost was met by the Home Mission, the remainder proved a heavy financial burden to the church for many years.¹⁰

A number of Crewe Baptists played no mean part in the activities of the Blue Ribbon Gospel Temperance Army, a particularly militant form of temperance agitation leavened with a sprinkling of Christianity and founded in the U.S.A. in 1877. Blue Ribbon Temperance services were more religious in character than the usual temperance rallies, lightened with a choir, band pieces and popular hymns of the Sankey type. The Blue Ribbon Army was inaugurated in Crewe in April 1882, with the Baptist, Richard Pedley, as President. Amongst its many supporters and members were Dr. W. Hodgson, the ageing Allan Priest and the Rev. W. Lees, the minister at Union Street.¹¹ The commencement of the Blue Ribbon movement in Crewe coincided with a struggle on the Town Council between the Liberal Party and the Independents (representing the all-powerful London and North Western Railway Company) assisted by the Crewe Constitutional Association. This struggle became known locally as the Intimidation Affair. Strangely, the Blue Ribbon Temperance movement became involved in this fight and sided with the Liberal Party. The details and narrative of this squalid conflict, in which the Liberal-Temperance-Nonconformist axis fought to secure political and religious freedom from the echelons of railway management, has been fully treated in Dr. Chaloner's definitive study of Crewe.¹² It need only be stated here that two of Crewe's Baptists, Richard Pedley and Dr. W. Hodgson, took a leading part in seeking to preserve the political and religious rights of individuals so dear to every nonconformist. In 1889 the whole affair erupted into almost a national issue following the discharge from the Railway Workshops of a number of workers, amongst whom were several prominent Liberal Party workers and temperance advocates. The case of one of these victims, Joseph Jones, was investigated by Henry Labouchere, the editor of *Truth*. The investigation led to further revelations, eventually causing the intervention of William Gladstone. There followed several full-scale debates in the Town Council in which Hodgson's oratorical gifts were powerfully used. Not satisfied at airing the affair at local level only, Hodgson, flanked by William McNeill (Primitive Methodist) and Richard Pedley raised the spectre of "Intimidation" at the half yearly meeting of the London and North Western Railway Company at Euston in February 1890. Their amendments were defeated but their purpose and resolve triumphed, since intimidation ceased and within a year the Railway Company "Independents" disappeared from the Council, either by resignation or rejection at the hands of a "free" electorate.

This victory was a tribute to the integrity, fortitude and courage of working men who risked their daily bread and to the political acumen of their local leaders, especially Hodgson, Pedley and McNeill, who bore the ire and invective of Railway Company officials. It is not without interest that two of the main leaders of this campaign were staunch Baptists.¹³

As the nineteenth century drew to its close the officials at Victoria Street were urgently considering a move to new premises because of the poor condition of the Victoria Street building¹⁴ and the lack of space to build a schoolroom. The town had grown dramatically westwards and consequently a mission room for Baptist services had been opened in 1878 in Underwood Lane, under the guidance of Allan Priest and Edward Price. It was closed in 1895, along with the Victoria Street chapel, when a new school (which also served as a chapel for five years) was opened in West Street, about halfway between the old chapel and the mission room. In 1900 a chapel was erected in West Street, seating about 500 persons. Thus the Baptists in Crewe were furnished with the buildings in which they still worship today.¹⁵

For the Baptists at Union Street the first four decades of the twentieth century saw solid progress being consistently maintained. It was no accident that this progress coincided with the long ministry of the Rev. J. Thomas, who served from 1893 until his retirement in 1927. During this period the building debt was extinguished, the church fabric improved and the membership increased from 119 in 1901 to 180 twenty years later. Membership continued to rise even after Thomas's retirement from the ministry and by 1938 was well over 200, much in excess of West Street where membership had fallen slowly from a peak of 202 in 1908 to 100 in 1932.

The Rev. T. B. Field, a fine preacher and excellent pastor, had supervised the move to the new chapel in West Street in 1900, remaining for a further nine years until he left the town. Field also helped to form and lead the valiant, yet vain, struggles of the militant Passive Defence League, a group formed to focus local nonconformist agitation against the Tory (1902) Education Act. Growing concern with the falling membership and endless financial troubles occupied the church leaders at West Street during the twenties and thirties. Special efforts were planned to meet the recurring yearly deficit. Late in 1929 a deputation went from the church to seek assistance from the Lancashire and Cheshire Baptist Association. It was also recorded in the church minutes that ". . . a general meeting of church and congregation be called . . . to consider ways and means of dealing with the present financial position".¹⁶ This meeting must have been successful for the building debt was completely extinguished within two years. The problems of lapsing members, dwindling congregations and the spiritual temperature of the church were grappled with by various means, but proved even harder to resolve than the financial difficulties. The minister at West Street, the Rev. A. Cook, retired

in 1937 after serving for seventeen years. Replacement was difficult and conversations were held between the deacons at West Street and the Baptist Church at Nantwich, about four miles distant, regarding the possibility of sharing a minister—an arrangement which was tried about ten years later.¹⁷

As the thirties drew to a close, Crewe was a few years away from its centenary as a railway colony. Its Baptist churches at Union Street and West Street still retained a presence in the town—a presence and influence which had never been as strong as might have been expected in a working class town. As Dr. Ian Sellers has remarked, this was perhaps due to the impressive success of the Primitive Methodists, who were undoubtedly the foremost nonconformist denomination in Crewe. A glance at membership data immediately reveals the success of Primitive Methodism when compared with the Baptists in Crewe. Between 1875 and 1930 the Primitive Methodists increased from 288 to 743 members compared with a Baptist membership which rose from 116 to 313 during the same period. In seating capacity the Baptists lost out both relatively and absolutely, for as the century wore on, their accommodation fell from an ability to seat 6 per cent of Crewe's population in 1861 to 2.7 per cent forty years later, by which time the Primitive Methodists' comparative figure was 5 per cent. Although less successful than the Primitive Methodists in Crewe, the Baptist evangelistic performance compares favourably with other denominations during the century after 1840; the Baptists were always stronger and more vigorous than either the Unitarians or the Congregationalists.

Despite the adverse comparison with the Primitive Methodists it remained true that the Baptist cause was alive in the town; the spiritual descendants of Priest, Swinton, Price, Hodgson and Pedley were holding firm and seeking to provide the opportunity for future generations to hear their own particular view of Christianity.

NOTES

¹ J. Hall, *History of the Town and Parish of Nantwich* (Nantwich 1883), p. 397.

² *Baptist Reporter*, new series, vol. 7 (1850), p. 531.

³ *Ibid.*; *Primitive Church Magazine*, new series, vol. 7 (1850), p. 251.

⁴ Most of the early baptisms took place in the Valley Brook.

⁵ *Bardley's Crewe Almanac* (1902), pp. 46-8; *Baptist Reporter*, new series, vol. 13 (1856), pp. 253, 313.

⁶ *Baptist Reporter*, new series, vol. 13 (1856), p. 313; *Crewe Guardian*, 18th May 1878, p. 5.

⁷ J. H. Lea, 'The Growth of the Baptist Denomination in Mid-Victorian Lancashire and Cheshire', *Trans. Lancs. and Cheshire Hist. Soc.*, vol. 124 (1972), pp. 128-53.

⁸ Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches, Minutes, 28th May 63, 12th June 62 and 19th May 63; *Baptist Reporter*, new series, vol. 2 (1865), p. 346; *Crewe Guardian*, 12th May 1878, p. 5.

⁹ *General Baptist Magazine*, vol. 84 (1882), p. 108.

¹⁰ Union Street Baptist Church, Minutes, vol. 1 (1882-1917).

¹¹ *Crewe Guardian*, 7th February 1883, p. 5.

¹² W. H. Chaloner, *The Social and Economic Development of Crewe, 1780-1923* (Manchester 1950).

¹³ Chaloner, pp. 162-6.

¹⁴ This building, now unused, is still standing, having recently been closed after serving as a furniture store.

¹⁵ *West Street Jubilee Pamphlet* (1901); *Crewe Guardian*, 4th April 1900, p. 6.

¹⁶ West Street Baptist Church, Minutes, 25th September 1929.

¹⁷ *ibid.* (1926-31)

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