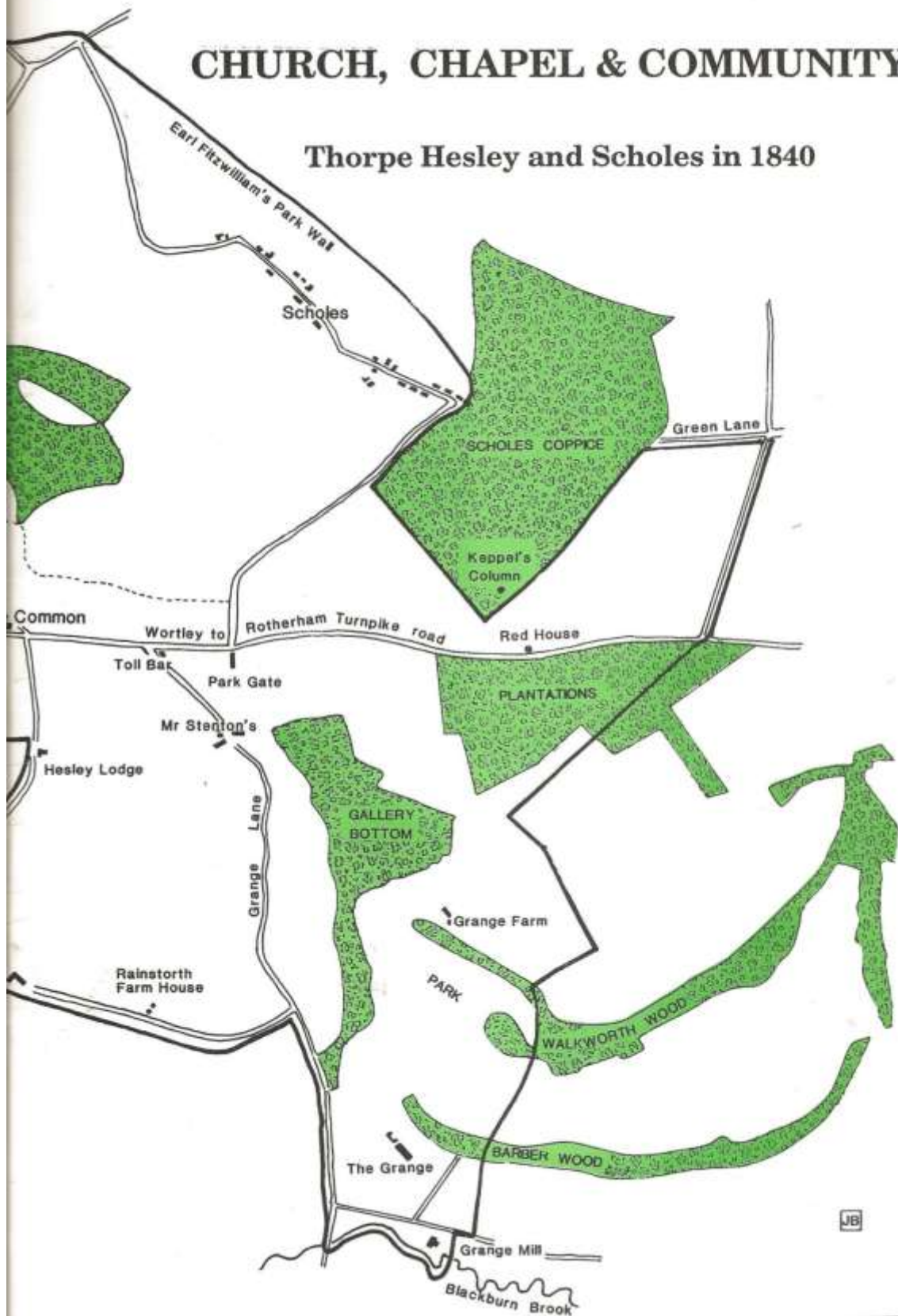


CHURCH, CHAPEL & COMMUNITY :

Thorpe Hesley and Scholes in 1840



CHURCH, CHAPEL & COMMUNITY

Thorpe Hesley & Scholes in 1840

by

Stephen Cooper, Robert Chesman
and Melvyn Jones

Stephen Cooper
Robert Chesman
Melvyn Jones

To celebrate the 150th anniversary
of Holy Trinity Church

-1990-

THE PARISH CHURCH

by Stephen Cooper

1990 is the 150th anniversary of Thorpe Hesley parish church. The land for it was donated in 1836, building work took place between 1837 and 1839, and the ceremony of consecration took place on Whit-Tuesday, 1840. How and why was the church of Holy Trinity built?

150 years is not a long time in English history, and Thorpe Hesley has probably existed as a community for something approaching 1,500. It is mentioned in Domesday Book, and its name suggests that it was settled by Danish Vikings, and before them by Anglo-Saxons. But until the 1830s the village had no church of its own. For centuries it was divided between the parishes of Wath-upon-Dearne, Rotherham, and Ecclesfield. The nearest church was that at Wentworth, a 'chapel-at-ease' within the large parish of Wath. Many of the inhabitants of Thorpe could walk or ride there, using the road which skirted the Chapelfields, or the path via Church Gate Shutt and the Thorn Well. But this was not very convenient, whilst the ancient churches at Rotherham and Ecclesfield were several miles away. Some may even think that the lack of a church in the village itself, together with the absence of any resident squire or parson, contributed to the growth of Methodism in the late eighteenth century. Certainly, John Wesley and other preachers were given an enthusiastic reception here, and the first place of worship to be built in Thorpe Hesley was not an Anglican church at all, but the Methodist chapel which was erected in Thorpe Street in 1797 (and replaced by the present Thorpe Street church in 1906).

The effects of the Industrial Revolution were felt everywhere in the North of England. In many places, communities which had remained unchanged for centuries grew at a phenomenal rate, and the old parishes ceased to correspond with the new centres of population. Thorpe Hesley was not one of those villages which grew out of all recognition; but by 1828-31, when Joseph Hunter's South Yorkshire was published, it was nevertheless "a populous village inhabited for the most part by nailers and agriculturists" (and, he might have added, by miners). It was a new world which was being created, and the old boundaries would no longer serve.

The legislators were not ignorant of the problem. Many agreed with Lord Liverpool that "in the manufacturing districts a great want was felt of churches", and in particular that the Established Church was at a disadvantage in comparison with the Dissenters, who "had in their power to build places of worship in any number", since they did not need to refer "to rights of property and the discipline of the Church". The result was the Million Act of 1818, which was intended to facilitate the building of additional Anglican churches in 'populous' parishes. The Act as subsequently amended also provided legal machinery, whereby new parishes could be created out of the old. The effect was dramatic: in England as a whole the Church Building Commissioners built 1077 new churches between 1818 and 1856, and they were not the only agency involved. In Sheffield, 10

new churches were erected, while the medieval parish was divided into 25 new units in 1846.

We can therefore see that Thorpe's experience in acquiring its own church and parish, in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, was far from unique: it was part of a pattern which reflected the fundamental changes which were taking place, as England developed into 'the workshop of the world'.

* * *



Holy Trinity

Churches are not constructed by impersonal historical forces. There have to be individuals with the commitment and the money to build them. The deeds to Holy Trinity, now kept in the Archives Department of Sheffield City Libraries, tell us the names of the people involved. There was Charles Noel Noel, Lord Barham, the Rev Joseph Browne of Mill Hill Hendon, and the Rev Thomas Sutton, vicar of Sheffield (the same who presided over the subdivision of that parish a few years later). These three raised most of the money required to build and endow the church; and there was also Charles Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 5th Earl Fitzwilliam of Wentworth Woodhouse, who provided the land.

Of these, we know most about Fitzwilliam. He was a man of intense religious conviction. His faith, though stern - a contemporary called him 'Praise God Barebones' Fitzwilliam after a famous Puritan of the Cromwellian era - was firmly wedded to the Church of England, and he helped to establish several Anglican churches. He was also a great philanthropist, known in particular for generosity to his tenants and employees. The people of Thorpe Hesley qualified on both counts: they lived only half a mile from his Park, and in many cases they inhabited his cottages, they tilled his land, and they worked on his estates. In addition, following the Fitzwilliam Estate

The Parish Church

Exchange Act of 1792, the Fitzwilliams had replaced the Foljambes as lords of the small manor of Thorpe.

The historic centre of Thorpe Hesley lies in Thorpe Street. In 1836, there were several 'homesteads' or farmhouses on either side of this street, while those on the south side had 'crofts' behind them, extending from the houses to the brook which ran down the hill towards Wentworth. Many of these crofts belonged to Earl Fitzwilliam. Two of them, those at one time rented by the Widow Jenkinson and by John Burgon, adjoined a footpath leading from Thorpe to Scholes, and were divided into two roughly equal parts. It was the back section of these two crofts, comprising a little over an acre in all, which Fitzwilliam donated, by deeds dated 28 and 29 October 1836. The land was transferred to five trustees. These were the Rev Walter Augustus Shirley, of Shirley in Derbyshire (rector of Whiston and later Bishop of Lichfield), the Rev John Lowe the younger (perpetual curate of Swinton), Henry Walker (one of the Walkers of Clifton House Rotherham), Henry Wilson esquire (of Westbrooke House Sheffield), and George Younge (a banker, also from Sheffield). It was stated that the land which Fitzwilliam gave must be used "for the purpose of building and endowing a Church for the celebration of Divine Service according to the Rites of the United Church of England and Ireland", in accordance with the provisions of the Million Act and subsequent legislation.

We learn from a later deed that Fitzwilliam's donation was made on the basis that 'sufficient funds' would be raised (apparently by others) for the building of the proposed church. The money was in fact raised by voluntary subscription, Lord Barham, Rev Browne and Rev Sutton putting up the lion's share. The connection of these three benefactors with the village of Thorpe Hesley is something of a mystery. The present writer is inclined to think that the unseen hand guiding their actions was that of the Countess of Effingham, wife of Kenneth Alexander, 11th Baron Howard, for whom the Earldom of Effingham had been revived on 27 January 1837. The evidence for this is circumstantial, but may be thought persuasive: White's Directory of 1838 states baldly that Thorpe Hesley church was "built chiefly at the cost of Earl Fitzwilliam and the Earl of Effingham"; the Earl and Countess's principal residence at Thundercliffe Grange (pictured on the next page) was within the boundaries of the new parish, while the Earl was lord of the manor of Kimberworth, which included part of the village of Thorpe; the Countess is referred to several times in the documents relating to the church, and she was definitely responsible for the building of the school next door. Finally, it was the Countess who deposited the deeds to both church and school with London bankers in October 1842.

What is certain is that Lord Barham, the Rev Browne and the Rev Sutton raised most of the money required, and that on 1 December 1836, as 'the Major part in Value of the Subscribers', they gave notice of their intention to build the new church. By law, they had to serve notice on anyone with an interest in any of the parish and district churches and chapels of the Established Church in the vicinity, and so 20 notices were served in all - on the ministers and patrons of Wath, Rotherham and Ecclesfield naturally, but also on those of Wentworth, Greasborough,



Thundercliffe Grange (home of the Countess of Effingham)

Bolsterstone, Hoyland, Midhope, Stannington, Bradfield, Tinsley, Swinton, and Wadsley, as well as on the Archbishop of York.

These notices are a mine of information concerning the motives and intentions of those concerned. They recite that according to the census of 1831 the population of the parish of Wath was now 6927, that of Rotherham was 10417, and that of Ecclesfield 13415. The existing Anglican churches and chapels did not "afford accommodation for one third of the Inhabitants for the attendance upon Divine Service". And there were in the three parishes mentioned (at least) "300 persons resident upwards of two miles from the said existing Churches and Chapels, and within one mile of the site upon which the said new Church is proposed to be erected."

The new church was to be capable of accommodating 500 people, and the plan was to spend £750 on the building works. The subscribers also intended to provide a fund of at least £1000 "to be secured upon Lands or Money in the Funds". The income from this fund, when added to the Pew-Rents and other profits of the church, would be used to pay the minister's salary. Another fund would be created, equivalent to 5% of the cost of building and fitting out the new church, plus 5% of the annual pew-rents, in order to finance future repairs to the new church.

This reference to pew-rents reminds us that social attitudes were entirely different in 1840 from what they are today. It was still a case of "the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate" - and every man to his own pew on a Sunday. Indeed the Million Act of 1818 envisaged that new

The Parish Church

churches would be paid for out of pew rents, though it provided that not less than one-fifth of the pews should be set aside as free seats for the poor. The subscribers for Thorpe Hesley church did better than this, however, for they declared "one-third at least of the sittings in such Church to be and continue for ever as free sittings." The remaining pews would be let by the churchwardens.

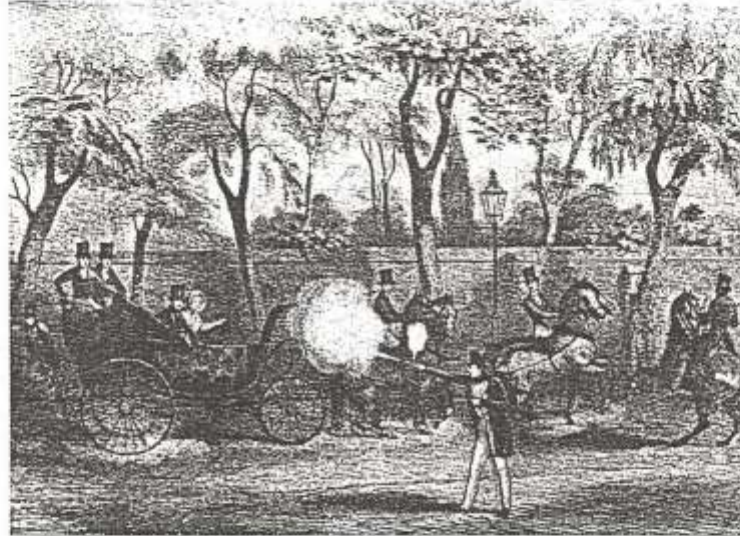
Presumably in recognition of their efforts, Lord Barham, the Rev Browne and the Rev Sutton became 'patrons' of the new church. On 30 December 1836, the Archbishop of York granted them the right to nominate the minister, during the lifetime of the Countess of Effingham: after her death, the right of nomination would pass to the five trustees of Earl Fitzwilliam's conveyance.

* * *

The new church was built in the Gothic style so beloved of the Victorians. The first stone was laid on 1 March 1837. The architect was J.P. Pritchett the elder, who also built St Mary's Rawmarsh and St Mary's Greasborough. Indeed, according to the Dictionary of National Biography, Pritchett was in the fortunate position having "almost a monopoly of architectural work in Yorkshire" at this time, due partly perhaps to the fact that he was "surveyor and architect on the extensive estates of three successive Earls Fitzwilliam".

There was a cemetery provided next to the church; and the new building was "adorned and furnished with a Communion Table, Pulpit, Reading Desk, Font and other Necessaries in a fit and proper manner". As often happens, the building costs seem to have far exceeded the original estimate of the subscribers, for it is recorded that a sum of £1800 was expended, rather than the £750 mentioned in the notices of 1836. Indeed, with the cost of fitting out, the total spent seems to have been closer to £2000.

At last the new church could be used, and it is recorded that it was opened for divine service on 17 July 1839; but as we know the formal ceremony of consecration did not take place until Whit-Tuesday, 9 June 1840. There was a holiday atmosphere that day. On Whit-Monday, the Sheffield Sunday Schools had held their annual festival, and Rotherham Fair had taken place, in 'exceedingly fine weather', though some thought that "the show of horses was poor, and the business generally dull". Tuesday was Masborough Feast, when "the place was thronged, during the day, by great numbers of well-dressed people from the neighbourhood, and also from Sheffield, with whom the principal object of attraction was the station recently erected by the North Midland Railway Company". On Whit-Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, a total of 12000 passengers travelled on the Sheffield and Rotherham Railway. All these junketings were reported in the local papers the following Saturday, despite the fact that the nation was by then preoccupied with other news. For, on Wednesday 10th June an insane pot-boy called Edward Oxford had attempted to assassinate Queen Victoria, by shooting at her as she drove from Constitution Hill towards Hyde Park Corner. The Queen had only recently married, she was four months pregnant at the time, and the outrage and indignation which was felt can easily be imagined.



The attempt to assassinate Queen Victoria, 1840

The news of the consecration of Thorpe Hesley's church appeared in The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent:

"CONSECRATION OF THORPE CHURCH - On Tuesday morning, the 9th instant, the new church of Thorpe, and the churchyard, were consecrated by the Archbishop of York, a fine looking venerable old gentleman, near 83 years old. He came on Monday from London to Sheffield, where he stayed all night, and arrived at Thorpe about 9 o'clock, a.m., the time appointed for the commencement of the service. The Bishop conducted the usual ceremony on such occasions with great solemnity, assisted by one of his ministers. The Rev Mr Partington, vicar of Wath, preached an appropriate sermon from Haggai, ii, 18th and 19th verses. There were many of the neighbouring clergymen present, in their gowns, amongst whom we recognised Archdeacon Corbett, and the Vicar of Sheffield. There was also a large congregation, even more than could be accommodated in the church, the major part of which consisted of the working classes. After the service a collection of £8 2s 6d was made at the door, to assist in defraying the expenses of the Church and school; but as the intention of making a collection had not been generally made known, it was smaller than it otherwise might have been. A cold collation was afterwards provided by Lady Effingham, who was in attendance, of which the Archbishop and the clergy partook; after which the Bishop left Thorpe for Barnsley, where he had some other official duty to perform."

Although Thorpe Hesley now had its own church, it was not yet a parish. The first entries in the parish registers refer to the new building simply as 'the District Church of Thorpe'; but the Million Act and subsequent legislation provided not merely for the building of new churches, but also for the creation of new parishes; and it was not long before an appropriate area was taken from Wath, Rotherham, and Ecclesfield. On 31 December 1841

The Parish Church

the Archbishop assigned a district to the "the newly erected Trinity Church at Thorpe Hesley" (the word 'Holy' was not used). The area included Thorpe Hesley, Thorpe Common, Scholes, and Thundercliffe Grange. The deed of assignment is interesting, for it contains a very detailed verbal description of the boundaries of the new parish, as well as a fine plan - a simplified version of which appears on the cover of this book. The same deed tells us that the population of the district for which the new church was intended to provide was 1939, made up as to 489 persons in Wath parish, 1350 in Rotherham, and 100 in Ecclesfield. These figures differ from those cited in the notices of 1836: no doubt it was necessary to be more precise when framing the deed of assignment. We also learn that the minister of Thorpe Hesley was "to be licensed for the visitation of the sick and other pastoral duties and to conduct baptisms, churchings and burials" - but evidently not marriages. The first minister was in fact Samuel More Richards, who served for most of the rest of the 1840s.

The final stage in the series of legal transactions which established the new parish was reached on 5 April 1842, when a deed of endowment was signed. Lord Barham (now Earl of Gainsborough) and his two ecclesiastical colleagues were more generous than they had stated that they would be back in 1836, for they now declared that they were providing not £1000, but £1837 17s 6d, by way of a trust fund. This would be invested in the purchase of £2000 government stock (3% Consols), the income from which would pay the minister's salary. They also stated that they were investing another £100 of their own money (5 % of the total building costs), and a further £10 (two years' interest on the repair fund from 17 July 1839), to finance the maintenance of the fabric of the church.

On 19 October 1842, the Countess of Effingham collected up the deeds to Thorpe Hesley's new church, with those to the new school, locked them in a box, and consigned them to Messrs Hoare of Fleet Street, who acted as bankers to the trustees. (The document which records these events is reproduced at the end of this article). If the writer is correct in thinking that the Countess had played a central role in the building of Holy Trinity, she may have felt some satisfaction, when these deeds were despatched to London, and her task was completed.

* * *

The original parish registers of Thorpe Hesley have survived, and are also in the Archives Department at Sheffield. They were retrieved from a safe when the vestry of Holy Trinity was gutted by a fire started by intruders in October 1977. Fortunately they suffered little harm other than slight scorching, and some damage to covers and bindings, although they still smell as if they have been in a fire! These registers show that baptisms were conducted at Thorpe from 1839, the very first being that of Martha Ann, the daughter of John and Fanny Taylor, who were farmers at Scholes. This took place on 17 July. Although there are several gravestones in the churchyard which date from the early 1840s, the first burial which is recorded did not take place until 1847, and was that of Charles Edward Shaw, who had died on 23 May. No residence is stated for this person, and his age is not entered either: this perhaps lends support to the oral tradition in Robert Chesman's family that the first person to be buried at

Thorpe was a vagrant found dead by the roadside by his grandfather, who was the village constable. The first marriages at Thorpe did not take place until 9 November 1857, when two were celebrated - that between James Steer, an engine 'tenter' and Sarah Ann Sanderson, daughter of Ambrose Sanderson, shoemaker; and that between George Pashley, a miner, and Sarah Allott, daughter of Aaron Allott, who was also a miner.

* * *

As has been mentioned, Thorpe Hesley also acquired a school in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, on land adjoining the church on the east side. The site was donated by Hannah Rawson, an elderly and wealthy spinster, the last of the Rawsons of Brookside and Wardsend in the parish of Ecclesfield. Her family tree is reproduced in Hunter's Hallamshire, and her numerous gifts to charity are described in Eastwood's The History of Ecclesfield (1862); but the deeds of 24 and 25 August 1838 clearly state that she gave the land for Thorpe School at the request of the Countess of Effingham, who 'with divers others' was "desirous of erecting and building by subscription a school and house for the master and mistress thereof". Three of the sons of the Earl of Effingham were named as trustees. The school was to be under the management of the Countess during her lifetime, and thereafter under that of the minister of Thorpe Hesley church. The intention was to erect a school for the education of poor children of both sexes from Thorpe Hesley and Scholes, or within three miles thereof, to be united to the National School "for promoting the education of the poor in the principles of the established Church of England and Wales". In 1843, a vicarage was also built on the north side of Holy Trinity, on land donated once again by Earl Fitzwilliam.

It can therefore be seen that the late 1830s and early 1840s were an important time. In the space of a few short years, an impressive trio of buildings - church, school, and vicarage - had been erected at the very heart of the village, indicative of its new status as a parish, and also of the increasing importance placed by society upon the education of the people as a whole.

* * *

It is hard to imagine the world as it was in 1840. Britain was at war with China, over the right to export opium to that country. A British army was occupying the capital of Afghanistan, having deposed one monarch and substituted another. There were only 27 States in the U.S.A., California was largely wilderness, and Texas was an independent republic. Russia was ruled by a Tsar, and was expanding rapidly into Central Asia. Japan refused to trade with the outside world at all. Here at home, Queen Victoria was a young woman who was expecting her first child, the Chartist agitation was at its height, and the Anti-Corn Law League was in the process of being formed. The railway network was expanding rapidly. These are events and circumstances which none can recall. But in Thorpe Hesley, the Million Act Gothic church, built in the age of 'aristocratic enterprise', is still there for all to see - a reminder of the history of our village and our country, as well as a centre and a symbol of the Christian Faith.

This Box was done up & locked by
Lady Effingham on the 19th Oct. 1842
Immediately afterwards Consigned to the
Care of Messrs Hoare of Fleet Street Bankers
to the Trustees of Thorpe Church -

Contents

1. All the notices saved on all the Rectors
& Incumbents
2. The Deed of transfer of land for Site of
Thorpe Church
3. Disputed Deed, of Thorpe Church -
4. Deed of Patronage to Lady Effingham
5. Deed of Thorpe School

Charlotte Effingham -

NB The Endowment deed not yet signed by all the Trustees - but in
course of being signed & must be added before the time comes - etc.

'This Box was done up.....'

Primary sources:

Sheffield City Libraries (Archives Department)

1. South Yorkshire County Record Office 608/T 1-5 (deeds)
2. Newman and Bond Collection 538 (draft deeds etc)
3. Thorpe Hesley Parish Registers

Sheffield City Libraries (Local Studies Department)

1. The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 13 June 1840
2. Sheffield Mercury, 13 June 1840

The Church Commissioners: original deed of the vicarage, 1843

Rotherham Library (Local Studies and Archives)

1. Parker Rhodes Collection no 44: Fitzwilliam Estate Exchange Act, 1792
2. White's Directories for 1838 and 1841

Secondary works:

Robert Chesman: Thorpe Hesley, Its Past Present and Future, Hope Methodist Church 1987

Stephen Cooper: A House Divided, Bridge Publications, Penistone 1987

Essays in the Economic and Social History of South Yorkshire, ed S. Pollard and C. Holmes, S.Y.C.C. 1975

David Hey: Yorkshire from A.D. 1000, Longmans 1986

Joseph Hunter: Hallamshire, ed by Rev Alfred Gatty 1875

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Graham Mee: Aristocratic Enterprise: The Fitzwilliam Industrial Undertakings 1795-1857, Blackie 1975

THE METHODISTS

by Robert Chesman & Stephen Cooper

The same edition of The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent which reported the consecration of Holy Trinity on Whit Tuesday 1840, also carried news concerning Thorpe Hesley's Methodist community:

"THORPE SUNDAY SCHOOL ANNIVERSARY - On Sunday, the 7th instant two appropriate sermons were preached in Thorpe Methodist Chapel, in the afternoon and evening, by that liberal and enlightened minister of the Gospel, the Rev J. Bromley, one of the itinerant preachers in the Rotherham circuit. After each sermon, a collection was made in aid of the Sunday School, which amounted to the liberal sum of £17. The choir was superior to what is generally met with in a village chapel, especially the instrumental part, being principally performed by the Butchers, father and son who reside in Thorpe, and are the pride of the neighbourhood, as musicians."

We know something about the sermons of the Rev James Bromley, for he was a minister on the Rotherham circuit for three years from 1838, and his preaching was described by the Rev Russell in his Historical Notes of Wesleyan Methodism in Rotherham Circuit, published in 1910: "He was a distinguished preacher, and had the peculiar style of keeping his left hand begloved with a black kid glove while preaching, while the other hand held the glove loose, by means of which he emphasised his declarations by a constant smiting of the left hand." One is reminded of the advice once given to John Wesley himself by the evangelist John Nelson of Leeds: "No other preaching will do for Yorkshire but the old sort that comes like a thunderclap on the conscience. Fine preaching does more harm than good here."

* * *

Methodism was not new to Thorpe Hesley in 1840. Methodists nationally had recently celebrated their centenary, and it was also about 100 years since a Wesleyan 'Society' had first been formed in Thorpe, while the chapel in Thorpe Street was a little over 40 years old.

A farmer from Thorpe called Samuel Birks had played an important part in the history of Methodism in the Sheffield and Rotherham area as a whole. Birks led a long life (1726 - 1825), and earned a reputation as one of the 'patriarchs' of the religious revival.

In 1733, at the age of eight, Birks went with his father to hear John Wesley preach at Wentworth, at a time when the latter was still a member of the 'Holy Club' at Oxford. In 1738, young Birks was sent by his parents to escort the lay preacher David Taylor back from Heeley to Thorpe. Taylor preached in a barn there and his reception was such that a Methodist Society was soon formed: in particular, Taylor converted Mr and Mrs Johnson, who lived at Barley Hall. In 1741, John Nelson visited Birks's home; and in 1742, John Wesley himself came to Thorpe Hesley - the first of more than a dozen visits which he was to make during the next 40 years. He preached in the afternoon of 16 June 1742, and again the next morning, his

subject being 'The Righteousness of Faith'. His audience responded with wild enthusiasm.

The 1740s were the Methodists' heroic age, so far as Thorpe was concerned. John Wesley visited regularly. His followers preached in barns and fields, to ecstatic congregations. Mrs Johnson held her class at Barley Hall, and people came from miles around to 'take sweet counsel' here. William Green taught school, and became a local preacher, before moving to the wider stage of Rotherham.

However, not all the people in the Rotherham area extended a warm welcome to the Methodists. Indeed there were some who were so opposed to the new breed of preacher that they were prepared to use any means to stop them. One persecutor who had been in the army used to beat his drum during the sermon, another would enter a meeting with a bucketful of blood, and other 'ingredients from the slaughter-house' and hurl it at the preacher and the 'serious part' of the congregation. Sometimes, custard pies were thrown. On one occasion, hooligans tarred and feathered a horse belonging to John Johnson of Barley Hall, simply because it had been used to carry a Methodist preacher from Thorpe Hesley to Rotherham.



Barley Hall

In his Journal for 27 May 1743, Charles Wesley recorded an extraordinary encounter which he had with a mob in Thorpe, which was led by a harridan reminiscent of Dickens's Madame Defarge:

"David Taylor informed me, that the people of Thorpe, through which we should pass, were exceedingly mad against us. So we found them, as we approached the place, and were turning down the lane to Barley-hall. The

ambush arose, and assaulted us with stones, eggs, and dirt. My horse flew from side to side, till he forced his way through them. David Taylor they wounded in the forehead, which bled much: his hat he lost in the fray. I returned and asked them what was the reason a clergyman could not pass without such treatment. At first the rioters scattered; but their Captain, rallying, answered with horrible imprecations and stones that would have killed both man and beast, had they not been turned away by an hand unseen. My horse took fright, and hurried away with me down a steep hill, till we came to a lane, which I turned up, and took a circuit, to find our brother Johnson's. The enemy spied me from afar, and followed, shouting. Blessed be God, I got no hurt but only the eggs and dirt. My clothes indeed abhorred me, and my arm pained me a little by a blow I received at Sheffield. David Taylor had got just before me to Barley-hall with the sister, whom God had hid in the hollow of his hand."

This terrifying experience did not deter Charles from returning to Barley-hall the following year, on 9 February 1744, but he was clearly apprehensive:

"At nine [p.m.] I passed through Thorpe. I asked my companion 'Where are the pretty wild creatures that were for braining me and my horse, the last time I came this way?' He told me they had lost their spirit, with their Captain, a woman, the bitterest of them all, who died lately in horrible despair. This quite terrified our enemies - her daughter is now a believer, and several others in the place; nay, they have even got a Society among them."

Gradually, attitudes did change. John Wesley also remarked on this transformation, commenting in his Journal for 28 July 1757:

"How quiet is this country now, since the chief persecutors are no more seen! How many of them have been snatched away in an hour when they looked not for it! Some time since a woman of Thorpe often swore she would wash her hands in the heart's blood of the next preacher that came. But before the next preacher came she was carried to her long home..."

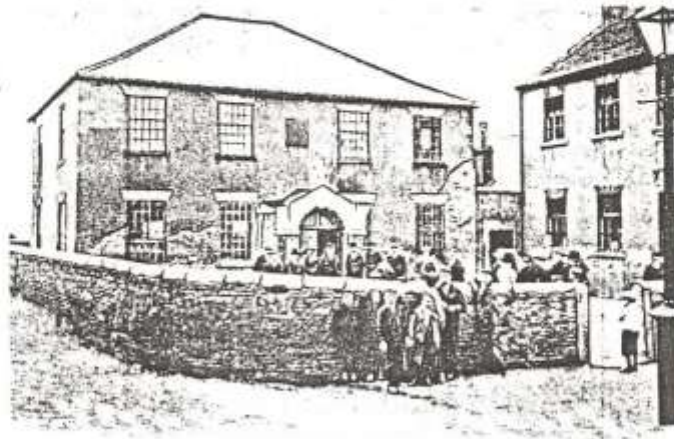
Perhaps this lady was the dreaded 'Captain', who had caused so much trouble for his brother Charles in Thorpe in 1743!

Thorpe Hesley became a centre of good preaching. In 1765, James Bailey of Potter Hill near High Green would visit Thorpe, Greasborough, and the Holmes near Rotherham, all in the same day, to hear the various sermons. By the time Mrs Johnson of Barley Hall died in 1769, and "took her flight to the paradise of God", the village was well-known as "the place where Mr Wesley and the first Methodist preachers found a temple and a home".

John Wesley came to Thorpe Hesley for the last time on 4 July 1786, when he also visited Wentworth Woodhouse. He wrote in his Journal:

"I went to Wentworth House, the splendid seat of the late Marquis of Rockingham. He lately had 40,000 a year in England and 15,000 or 20,000 a year in Ireland. And what has he now? Six foot of earth!
A heap of dust is all remains of thee!
'Tis all thou art; and all the proud shall be.
...About one I presched at Thorpe to three or four times as many as the preaching house would have contained."

The revival went from strength to strength; and in 1797 Samuel Birks, now 71, supervised the building of a chapel at the bottom of Thorpe Street, in the neo-Classical style.(1)



Old Thorpe Street Chapel - about 1900

By 1840 Thorpe Hesley had entered the Methodist history books. In his last years, Samuel Birks provided information for the Rev James Everett's Historical Sketches of Wesleyan Methodism in Sheffield, which was intended to demonstrate how the simplicity of early Methodism made it "a grand instrument for the purpose of spreading scriptural Christianity throughout the world." In about 1821, Everett came to see Birks in Thorpe, and made a drawing of the old man, who was now 95. Everett regarded Birks as 'a living record', and eagerly noted what the latter told him about the old days. His book was published in 1823 by James Montgomery, editor of the Sheffield Iris, and formed the basis of subsequent accounts by Habershon and Russell.



Samuel Birks (aged 95)

It is interesting that when Birks told Everett what had happened when Charles Wesley had narrowly escaped the mob in the 1740s, the termagant 'Captain' of Thorpe was not even mentioned; but the part played by Birks himself had become central!

"It was a moment of peril; but the instrument of deliverance came unexpectedly to hand. Mr. S. Birks, who was then a stout young man, about 18 years of age, and possessed of a considerable portion of native courage, had gone earlier than usual to plough that morning, in order to be able to attend preaching. He had left the field for the day, and was coming up the Barley Hall road in the direction of the mob. On hearing the shouts of the persecutors, and supposing something particular was going forward, he cracked his whip, mounted on one horse, leading a second, and driving two abreast before him. Just when the crowd were about to proceed to acts of violence, he drove in among them, some leaping over the hedges, others flying before him, for their own personal safety; meanwhile Mr Wesley and his friends made their escape by retracing their steps, and going round by way of Chapel-town to Barley Hall. The principal injury sustained was the loss of time, together with Mr Charles Wesley's hat; but he arrived at the destined place, with his handkerchief tied over his wig, in which state he had to ride some miles... 'Young Birks'... rode home with no small degree of heroic glee." (2)

The early Victorian trade directories also emphasised the place of Thorpe Hesley and of Samuel Birks in local Methodist history. Thus White's Directory of 1838 states:

"THORPE HESLEY, an old village, 6 miles N by E of Sheffield, is noted for the manufacture of nails... Here is a handsome chapel belonging to the Methodists, who, in John Wesley's time, held their meetings in the old farmhouse called Thorpe Hall, then occupied by Mr Samuel Birks, who died in 1821, aged 95, and was one of the first and most active proselytes to Methodism in this neighbourhood..." (3)

In 1840, the chapel in Thorpe Street was part of the Rotherham Circuit, and Methodists from Thorpe played an active role in Circuit affairs. The farmer Samuel Poles (1767 - 1835) acted as a trustee when a new chapel was built at Westgate in Rotherham in 1806, as did the nailmaker James Heeley. The conveyance deed of the site of this new chapel declared that the preachers therein must expound GOD'S HOLY WORD according to "John Wesley's notes on the New Testament and the four volumes of sermons published" - and 'no other doctrine'. Heeley, James Duke and John Hague were all lay preachers, and the latter's tombstone in Wentworth proudly declares to the world that he was "a local preacher amongst the people called Methodists".

The records of the Rotherham Circuit show that the movement was still expanding and winning converts in the first half of the nineteenth century: there were 43 Methodists in Thorpe Hesley in 1802, but by 1818 there were 70; and by 1834, there were no less than 101. No wonder the collections in the chapel in Thorpe Street were reported to be invariably 'liberal'!

* * *

It is clear that the village of Thorpe was home to many who set a good example to others, and were ready to 'rebuke sin before all men'. Thorpe Street must have echoed with sermons and hymns which exhorted men to fight the good fight, whilst Methodist classes inculcated the 'social virtues' - thrift, abstinence, hard work and respect for other people's property.

Those who attended the Sunday School - both teachers and scholars - were taught the paramount importance of moral conduct and behaviour. 'Let us not be weary in well doing' was the watch-word of the Friends and Teachers of the nearby Scholes Sunday School, whose Rules were drawn up in 1819, and similar precepts were doubtless inculcated in Thorpe. The newspaper report quoted at the beginning of this chapter paints a picture of a happy band of believers, worshipping and making music in perfect harmony.

But this is not quite the whole picture. There had always been divisions within Methodism, from the earliest days when Wesley and Whitfield had quarrelled and gone their separate ways. Later, there were secessions by Kilhamites and others. The Primitive Methodists were founded in 1810: they started to hold meetings in Thorpe Hesley in the 1850s, if not earlier, and built their own chapel here in 1859, in what is now Heslow Grove. (The building still survives, though it is used for other purposes).

So far as the main body of 'Wesleyan' Methodists was concerned, there were a number of issues which were already a source of disagreement by 1840. Some Methodists had begun to agitate for changes in the ways in which their Conference, or supreme governing body, was organised; others wished to commit the movement to the principle of teetotalism; there were also differences of opinion over forms of worship; and James Everett - the same who had interviewed Samuel Birks and written about Thorpe Hesley in the 1820s - had begun to publish (anonymously) a series of works, in which he attacked the Methodist establishment and leading figures within it.

Within ten years, these controversies were to lead to the expulsion of a number of individuals from the Conference, the first being James Everett himself, who was expelled in 1849. Within another ten years, the 'Reformers' had decided that it was impossible to win the Conference round to their point of view, despite having gained wide support in the country. Having thus failed to achieve the reform they desired from within, a substantial number of them seceded, to form their own organisation.

These events did not go unnoticed in Thorpe Hesley. We have seen that the preacher in Thorpe Street Chapel on Whit Sunday 1840 was James Bromley. He was to be an ardent supporter of the Reform movement, and as a result he was expelled from the Conference in 1850. We have also heard of the Butchers, father and son, who provided the instrumental music that Sunday in 1840, and were the 'pride of the neighbourhood'. There were several families called Butcher in Thorpe, and it is therefore impossible to be certain, but the son who played in 1840 may well have been Henry Butcher, who was mentioned in White's Directory of 1849 as a shopkeeper, and who appears in the Census of 1851 as a grocer aged 26, living in Thorpe Street with a wife called Charlotte. It was a grocer named Henry Butcher who threw in his lot with the Reform Methodists, and became one of the founders of the Hope Chapel in Brook Hill in 1856 - at some personal cost to himself, since many Wesleyans severed their business connections with him as a result.

The consequence of these developments was, that whereas White's had listed only one chapel in Thorpe Hesley in 1838, the same publication was to list

The Methodists

no less than three in 1862, noting: "The Wesleyan, Primitive and Reform Methodists have each chapels here."

When we look back, through ecumenical spectacles, these quarrels and secessions may strike us as regrettable. After all, the Thorpe Street and Hope Chapels now form part of one organisation (and the Primitive Methodist Chapel has not been used as such since the 1930s). But perhaps divisions such as those which have been described are not important after all. It is salutary to recall Robert Chesman's story of the old farmer who was asked which church he belonged to. He evidently thought for a few minutes, then he looked at the questioner. "Every week I go to market" he said slowly. "There are quite a few ways I can take to get there. But when I arrive at the market, they don't ask me by which road I came by. They only ask if my corn is good..."

(1) Birks's part in this is recited in a deed of 1856 kept at Talbot Lane, Rotherham. Thorpe Street chapel was rebuilt in 1906.

(2) Some writers state or imply that Charles Wesley suffered two ambushes in Thorpe, one in 1743 and the other in 1744; but Wesley himself did not mention a second attack in 1744; and the two incidents sound like one and the same.

(3) In fact, Birks died in 1825 not 1821: his tomb in Wentworth Old Churchyard, the Wentworth burial register, and his obituary in The Methodist Magazine, all confirm this.

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2. Jenkinson family deeds 6/F4/1: Rules of the Sunday School in Scholes, 1819.
3. White's Directories
4. Census of 1851

Tombs of Samuel Birks and John Hague in Wentworth Old Churchyard

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