

PRIM. ALDERSHOT

“PRIM. ALDERSHOT”

An account of the Primitive Methodist
Mission in Aldershot and the surrounding
areas and its links with the Army.

by

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To read any book with sympathetic understanding it is valuable to know a little of the background of the story to be told. At the beginning of our book, we will give a picture of this area of Hampshire that, through national decisions prompted by European conflicts, was completely transformed with irreversible consequences. The impact came with great speed and the local population was overwhelmed with the incoming rush of those who would find profit in serving the “Camp at Aldershot”. This book will also trace the influence of one branch of the Church that came to serve not only the military but possibly more significantly the growing population: the Primitive Methodist Church.

Our interest in this branch of the Methodist Church was ignited with the discovery of an old exercise book which in a somewhat disorderly manner described the memories of an old Prim., Mr Charles Winter. This book, written in longhand and entitled *Aldershot Primitive Methodism 1870–1935*, detailed the life and times of the Primitive Methodist Station and so arrested our imaginations that we set out on a journey of discovery to find out more about how Primitive Methodism came to the area and who were the preachers and members active in its service.

We have been working on this book for several years. The research has been protracted because there appear to be few secondary sources in respect of our area, so we have had to use mainly primary material. Similarly, there are no registers and a dearth of documents at local level, and even the Methodist Archives at John Ryland University in Manchester yielded little useful information.

At the outset of our research we were ignorant of two important facts: that North East Hampshire and West Surrey

were classed as an area of mission and that Primitive Methodism directed all mission work through the General Missionary Committee. Having equipped ourselves with this knowledge, we were then able to begin our long trawl through reams of archive material.

We have received help from many quarters of which only a few can be listed here. We are grateful to Mr Lance Martin and his staff at School of Oriental and African Studies, who were always ready to point us in fruitful directions and ensure that documents and books were at our disposal when needed. Likewise, to the staff at the Surrey History Centre, the Hampshire Record Office and the National Archives at Kew who cannot have known at the time that they were finding documents that helped us to take significant strides in our research. To Mr Stephen Phillips, the former Librarian at Aldershot Public Library who, from our first enquires, directed us to books, documents and local information which he, in his years of experience in Aldershot, was able to locate in the extensive acquisitions of the library.

Our particular thanks are given to three esteemed Methodist scholars: Rev. Dr Cyril Rodd, Dr John Vickers and Rev. Dr Stephen Hatcher. Dr Rodd directed us to Dr Vickers, the noted Methodist historian, who read our first draft and made very encouraging and useful comments. He, in turn, kindly recommended us to the Rev. Dr Stephen Hatcher who welcomed us to the Museum of Primitive Methodism at Englesea Brook and the treasures of its library. Dr Hatcher, the recognised authority on Primitive Methodism, gave of his precious time and shared with us his enthusiasm for this important branch of early Methodism, urging us with expectant hope to expand and publish our work.

We remember with thankfulness all who committed their lives to maintain the distinctive Christian witness of Primitive Methodism in this part of Hampshire and Surrey and it is to their memory that we dedicate this book.

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CHAPTER I

“I look upon all the world as my parish.”

John Wesley

UNTIL the middle of the 19th century Aldershot was a small isolated village on the edge of the heath land that covered much of north east Hampshire and west Surrey. News of important national events would have filtered through to the sparse population but only changes affecting the day-to-day life of this rural community would have made any lasting impression on the hearers. Therefore in August 1853 few local people would have been aware of the significance of Lord Hardinge’s visit to their village and fewer still would have known that he had made a previous visit in 1851. As Commander-in-Chief of the British Army he was following a proposal from the Prince Consort that a suitable location might be found for a permanent camp to test new battle tactics and training. Writing his report while lodging at the old Red Lion Inn he finalised the decision that the area was

“admirably adapted for the assembly of a large military force... with an ample supply of water at all seasons”.¹

His recommendation was accepted and in the same year military manoeuvres organised on Aldershot Heath were to prove of great value in the imminent war in the Crimea. When the Prince Consort supported the suggested plans for a permanent ‘Camp of Instruction’ the Army quickly arranged for Aldershot Common to be purchased for the nation. This new military training base was the first ever to be established in the whole country and the Royal Engineers were engaged as early as 1853 in planning the layout, installing water and sewage systems, and supervising the construction of the first hutted camps. Permanent barracks for

Cavalry, Artillery and Infantry regiments were under construction as it was foreseen that at least 12,000 men would need to be accommodated and at least 4,000 horses stabled and exercised. This programme was in progress by 1856 and Queen Victoria's own Royal Pavilion was opened in that same year. It was her great joy to travel to Aldershot to review her troops and watch the staged battles enacted for her delight. But the authorities who had planned with such detail for the practical training and accommodation of these young men had given less consideration to the moral problems that would inevitably take toll of soldiers and civilians alike.

Chaplains of the Church of England were appointed to be responsible for the well-being of the soldiers and in the early years, the spiritual oversight of all other inhabitants would remain with the vicar of St Michael the Archangel, the parish church.

In 1858 "the Government decided to appoint as chaplains and give payment to those priests of the Church of Rome who ministered to the troops"² and Presbyterians too were 'accepted' but no recognition was given to a branch of the Christian church that, since the middle of the previous century, had been working and preaching in towns and villages all over the country where they had met with the highest instances of debauchery and indulgence, similar to those now witnessed in Aldershot.

Dr William Rule, a Wesleyan minister with experience of Methodism and the army, came to Aldershot in 1856 and found many Methodist soldiers who expressed anger at being neglected by their church when compared with others. He applied for permission to visit his men and the reply received was:

"that it is not thought advisable to allow a precedent to be established for any forms of divine worship or for other officiating ministers than those provided by authority and the regulations of the army."³

Nevertheless, the Wesleyan Methodist Conference continued to appoint young ministers as chaplains to the Camp, but they were forbidden by the Chaplain General (Church of England) to visit

or care in any way for their men. This opposition continued until 1862 when a Government decision added a fourth accepted denomination: 'Other Protestants'.

Why were the government and hierarchy of the Church of England so opposed to Methodism in the army and here in the Camp at Aldershot? To find an answer we must look at the beginnings of this movement, which, if it had been allowed to grow in the established church, could have revitalised the Church of England at a time when apathy, political influences and spiritual poverty had all but separated it from the growing number of poor and displaced people in towns and cities.

John and Charles Wesley were both ordained priests in the Church of England, following in the footsteps of their father Samuel, the rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire. Charles went up to Oxford in 1726 and in time joined with other students to form 'The Holy Club' whose members were mockingly called 'Methodists' because of the precise and orderly manner of living out their faith. On returning to Oxford from Epworth, where he had been assisting his father, John joined them and became the leader. As a group they studied the Bible, prayed and fasted, and did 'good works' visiting prisons and distributing part of their small allowances to the poor and the sick.

The brothers travelled to America as part of their missionary calling but, after only two years, returned to England knowing that they had not accomplished their 'mission' as they had hoped; however the journey had brought them into contact with a group of Moravians whose steadfast courage and faith in the face of great danger greatly touched both John and Charles.

Back in London, and through the influence of the Moravian preacher, Peter Böhler, both brothers were to experience a "conversion", Charles first and then John who described the feeling of his heart being "strangely warmed" and confessing that he did trust in Christ alone for salvation. This change became evident in the powerful and challenging manner of his preaching with the result that the doors of many Anglican churches were closed to him as the incumbents considered that he was meddling

with the lives of those not entrusted to his care and that he should occupy himself with other tasks. The fire and fervour of John Wesley's preaching spoke to the condition of working men and women of the age; encouragement not found in the stilted sermons of men who spent more time with their farms or hounds to give thought to a message of comfort for their parishioners. Barred then from the rightful preaching places John took to preaching in private houses. A subsequent meeting with George Whitfield, a past member of the Holy club, led to his being invited to preach in the open air and so began the itinerant ministry to working men and women, the neglected of society, who would never be found in church.

Both John and Charles had gifts of communication, John in preaching, and Charles through the composition of memorable hymns. These talents, consecrated to God's ruling, brought about a religious revival transforming the lives of thousands. Threatened by rowdy mobs and considered extremist by the ruling class, John was not deterred from his mission to bring the knowledge of the love of God to those being abandoned by the established church. He considered the "whole world" as his parish and men and women responded to his call and lives were changed. The first "preaching houses' or chapels were erected within twelve months of the commencement of the open-air ministry."⁴ A preaching house did not replace the parish church for Methodists; all were still expected to attend a communion service in an Anglican church at least four times a year, but this was a place to hear the Word—there was no communion table. The first Methodist preaching house, the New Room, was opened in Bristol in 1741.

Very early in this ministry John Wesley knew that he had to protect and guide these groups of men and women who had found a new freedom through the Gospel. He therefore organised a system whereby each person was put into a 'Class' under the guidance of a Class Leader. Classes together made up a 'Society'. These societies in turn, were grouped into a circuit each sending representatives to a 'Circuit Quarterly Meeting' led by a preacher