

EARLY METHODISM IN STIFFKEY

Although Stiffkey chapel has been closed for some years now, many of us still remember it with affection. I was therefore particularly pleased to come across the following obituary in an old copy of the Primitive Methodist magazine "**The Christian Messenger**". The article gives a interesting insight into the origin of the Stiffkey society. It throws into focus some of the attitudes prevailing at the time - as a plant pathologist I was particularly interested to learn that potato blight, which caused such hardship (especially in Ireland) in the 1840s, was seen by some as a "judgement of God"!

"John Smith was born at Stiffkey in Norfolk in March 1822. His parents attended the services of the Wesleyan Methodists, but made no religious profession. When a young man he was fond of company and intoxicating drink. Like the prodigal son he left home and for a long time wandered in the north of England, suffering from frequent privation and hardship. Through the judgement of God (in sending the potato disease) he was convinced of his sin and in a state of great spiritual distress he returned home. After months of sorrow and anguish (during which period he wasted almost to a skeleton) he obtained a knowledge of the forgiveness of his sins. Mr. Lexton, a Primitive Methodist local preacher, and some other friends from Warham came to Stiffkey to hold religious services. One evening, at a cottage prayer meeting to which he had been invited, .. [he] .. found rest to his burdened soul by faith in Christ. An old cottage was hired and a society formed and from that time preaching was regularly appointed. By his liberality and zeal Mr. Smith was Father to the infant cause. In December 1849 he received a note of liberty to speak before our congregations and two years after he was admitted a preacher on trial. For nearly thirty years he laboured with consistency and diligence as a local preacher and during that time he generously provided a home for the preachers. He entered the marriage state in 1860 and found his wife an help-meet in life's duties and labour. In open-air religious services he took much pleasure. For many years he was a total abstainer from intoxicating drinks. On Saturday 6 November 1880 he was accidentally injured while riding home from work on a bullock. After four days of suffering he peacefully passed to his heavenly rest. He was a good man, and beloved by friends and respected by enemies he departed this life. His removal is a loss to our station, and especially to the Stiffkey society of which he was a faithful leader."*

The manner of Brother John's death provides a timely warning to us all - do take extra care when riding bullocks!

probably one of a pair of draft oxen