

THE STORY OF METHODISM IN MATTISHALL

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Few people have bothered to write the story of a Methodist village society because the period covered is so short compared to the long centuries of English recorded history. The society at Mattishall can go back 120 years, but that is not long when one remembers that the tower of the parish church of All Saints has stood like a proud sentinel since the 14th century looking out over the farmlands of Mid-Norfolk. And for 500 years the carved angels of its hammerbeam roof have looked down upon the villagers coming in and out to their devotions. Yet the story of Methodism in Mattishall deserves to be told for it contains a chapter of truly amazing missionary enterprise. Moreover, in the history of this village cause we see something of the faith, courage and sacrifice that established Methodism in so many Norfolk parishes.

Of the men who made this story, some were gifted, a few were well-to-do, but most were ordinary working people; their hands were toil-hardened, their clothes were often coarse; by day they walked behind the nodding plough-teams, but at evening they gathered in their little chapels or preaching-rooms for prayer, and walked in heavenly places with their God.

For nearly a century and a quarter Mattishall has been a stronghold of Methodism. For fifteen years it was the hub of a tremendous missionary effort. The society formed there in the reign of William IV has been a power for righteousness and has sweetened the life not only of that parish but of Mid-Norfolk. The work of the Primitive Methodist minister, Rev. Robert Key, in central Norfolk during the early "thirties" of last century, has been called "one of the most stirring records

in Primitive Methodist history." Mattishall was his centre, and it always occupied a large place in his affections.

The Methodists were not the first Nonconformists in Mattishall by any means, and we hasten to pay tribute to the work that the Congregationalists and the Society of Friends did before Methodism was called of God to its task. The Methodists had to face ridicule and bitter opposition, but fiercer persecution and greater hardships had been borne by the early Congregationalists and the "Quakers." The Congregationalists in Mattishall take their history back 300 years, although their historian, John Browne, will not accept this for want of written evidence. But it is known that William Hunt commenced his ministry at Mattishall before 1725. A chapel was built, (but pulled down about 1760. Twelve years later a Congregational church was formed with its meeting house known as Old Moor chapel, which still stands.

The Friend's meeting-house and burial ground can be seen at the west end of the parish.

There is no record that John Wesley visited Mattishall, but he often passed close by when travelling between Norwich and King's Lynn. The Wesleyan Methodists came to Mattishall and started a cause, building a chapel on the Garvestone road, half a mile from the parish church. A bungalow now stands upon the site.

The Wesleyan society went to pieces, and the chapel was abandoned. The Congregationalists took it, but only for a time. Then, according to Robert Key, it passed into the hands of "a notorious female impostor by the name of M.S." By this time the chapel had a thoroughly bad name. No one wanted it. Almost all the windows were broken; cobwebs hung from walls and seats. Thus it stood until one morning in the winter of 1830/1 when a young man of 26, with fair complexion and dark wavy hair came striding from the village, saw it, and began making enquiries. That man was Rev. Robert Key, the Apostle to the Norfolk Villagers.

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Rev. Robert Key

When Rev. Robert Key was buried in 1876 the minister preaching the funeral address described his great labours in Mid-Norfolk, and concluded by saying "Can we wonder that in that 'region' his name is still as ointment poured forth." Much has happened since then, and many years have passed, but the name of Key is still cherished, and because he has meant so much to Mattishall Methodism the following account of the man is given.

Robert Key was born at Upton-All-Saints, an obscure village on the Suffolk/Norfolk border, in 1805—the year of the Battle of Trafalgar. Little is known of his early youth, but he worked on Yarmouth quay as a coal-heaver and fell in with a gang of poachers, gamblers and cock-fighters. Several members of this gang were caught when breaking into a house and transported. Key saw the danger signal, began thinking seriously, and was converted in 1826. He became a Travelling Preacher or minister, on the Yarmouth circuit two years later.

Key was married in 1824, and lost his only child in infancy. He later adopted a little girl.

In 1828 the young preacher was sent to the North Walsham circuit where the ex-coal heaver was apparently too primitive a Methodist for some of the folk. In 1830 he set out to mission the Mid-Norfolk villages. In most of these villages the light of the Gospel had not reached the majority of the working classes; drunkenness and immorality prevailed; cock-fighting, dog-fighting and man-fighting were Sunday pastimes. Key said that Shipdham, Watton and East Dereham might have been "matched against any other three places of similar size for brutal violence and inveterate hatred of the truth." To face the hostility and preach Christ to such men needed a man above men. Robert Key was such. He had a powerful physique, exceptional stamina, and the buoyant courage of a great missionary.

In spite of opposition he founded societies in several villages and decided to make Mattishall his headquarters for further operations. He hired a small cottage, scant in furniture and with larder equally bare. In one of his early Quarters his salary was less than £2 for the thirteen weeks—about 3/- per week. He would have wanted bread and the necessities of life had it not been for the charity of his friends.

While at Mattishall his health failed for a time through his labours and privations. He was brought to death's door. During this affliction he received a visit from Billy Braithwaite, an

eccentric Primitive Methodist. Billy earnestly prayed for Mr. Key's recovery, saying in his own style of expression: "Lord, take me and spare Brother Key. I am not fit for much in Thy service. I can be better spared than Key. Lord, restore him and give him a cast-iron body and leather lungs."

Key's first chapel was at Cawston. It was a wooden building and the missionary helped to build it. His first connexional chapel was built at North Tuddenham.

During his 48 years ministry Key travelled on many circuits. He was superannuated in 1864 and settled in Norwich, attending Dereham Road chapel. He was still in great demand for "specials" and continued preaching and lecturing until he died—in harness.

John Wesley preached his last sermon in Norfolk at Diss, so did Robert Key. When he was there in August, 1876, he preached, to use his own expression, with "hell out of sight behind, and heaven just a little before." He died the next month—September 2nd, 1876, at the age of 71, and was interred in Norwich Cemetery. The Mayor and a large company were present. Another workman of God was buried, but the work went on.

Mattishall's pride in Key's labours is justifiable. He tramped countless miles preaching the Gospel, often begging his bread and shelter, often hungry, footsore and utterly weary, but never complaining. With splendid courage he faced organised and cruel opposition alone. Entering a village with a borrowed chair in one hand and a hymn book in the other, singing a Methodist hymn, he expected and usually received ridicule and violence, but he won his foothold. A contemporary writer said "Such labour and privations for Christ that Mr. Key in his early ministry endured, stamped his character as truly apostolic." Key was an apostle—our Mid-Norfolk Apostle!

To hear him preach was a rich experience. His preaching had the power of an incoming tide. There was fire in his soul, in his eyes, and in his words. At Shipdham he "poured out red hot truths." A Hockering convert describing a sermon of Key's said "It was hot as a burning billet within me." Power, fire and true eloquence marked his preaching.

His rallying cry was "SUCCESS TO THE 'GOOD INTENT'" and when he used it in his discourses it always brought a terrific response from his hearers.

Reviewing a speech of Key's at Spurgeon's Tabernacle the "Wesleyan Times" said—"Rev. Robert Key's speech embodied

some of the most sublime representations of the glory of the Cross, and expressions in language so elegant, with illustrations so beautiful that a finer piece of fervent oratory we never remember to have listened to."

There were at one time many in the Connexion who regarded our county somewhat disdainfully—can any good thing come out of Norfolk? Key attended a Conference camp meeting in the North as delegate from the Norwich District. The leader, after the first delegate had preached, remarked rather invidiously (so Key thought) "That's from Yorkshire!" Another followed, "That's from Lincolnshire!" And so on. Key was roused, and when he heard his name called out rather coolly he was on his mettle. He preached from the text "God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" His hearers were startled with burst after burst of true eloquence. Many were amazed at the beauty and power of his words. In a tempest of holy fervour he closed his grand address crying "And that's from Norfolk!"

Key was present at the stone-laying of Dereham Commercial Road chapel in 1863. He was indignant at a Ritualist Tract that had just been published. After paying tribute to Mr. J. H. Tillett, M.P. for Norwich, who was present, and the reporting of the "Norfolk News," he said, "I wish there had been a Norfolk News when I first travelled about the county. I was knocked down, clothes torn off, and foully ill-used, and when I brought any one up, I could get no justice but was saddled with the expenses of the action." Then he turned his heavy artillery against the clergymen and concluded by saying "A certain parson said to one of our preachers, 'Leave off! Leave off!' He replied 'I won't leave off, and you can't make me—only by cutting my tongue out. But I could make you leave off in three ways—Take away your BOOK and you COULD NOT talk. Take away your GOWN and you DARE NOT. Take away your TITHE and you WOULD NOT. None of these things would stop me.'

When the religion of the Jesus Christ is published slavery and despotism will disappear.

Don't you say that pamphlet is false? (Cries: Yes. Yes.)

And that man ought to be censured. (Yes. Yes.)

And that pamphlet ought to be burned. (Yes. Yes.)

And are you glad that Primitive Methodism came into this part of the county? (Yes. Yes. Praise the Lord.)

Hold up your hands you that are glad that Primitive Method-

ism ever came here. (Large show) We love everybody but care for nobody."

Happily a much better relationship now exists with the Established clergy.

Key was very fond of children and always remembered Hugh Bourne's dying injunction "Take care of the children."

There is a delightful anecdote of his conversation with a lad on the Fakenham circuit. The minister asked the boy what he wanted to be when he grew up.

"A missionary," was the reply.

"And where do you intend to go as a missionary?"

"To Africa," said the boy. "I shall take a gun with me."

"What will you do with the gun?"

"Shoot the lions."

"What else will you do?" asked Key.

"Convert one of the black men."

"What will you do after that?"

"Why set him to work to convert another, and then I shall want to come home to my mother."

Key's signature can be seen on the earliest circuit reports.

B. Aquila Barber says of Robert Key in "A Methodist Pagan": "In his ceaseless activities and glorious abandon he recalls William Clowes. Like Clowes, too, he had qualities of dynamic personality."

It is thought that George Borrow's description of the open air preacher in "Lavengro" was Robert Key—"There stood the preacher one of those men—and thank God their number is not few—who, animated by the Spirit of Christ, amidst much poverty, and alas much contempt, persist in carrying the light of the Gospel amidst the dark parishes of what, but for their instrumentality would scarcely be Christian England."

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Founding a New Society and a New Circuit

This, then, was the man who saw the derelict chapel at Mattishall on that wintry morn in 1813. To him it was a direct challenge. He went back to his Quarterly Meeting at North Walsham and asked to be allowed to hire it. The folk at North Walsham lacked Key's zeal. They gave him no help. However, after much prayer and thought he made up his mind to hire the building and "sell the coat off his back to pay the rent if it were necessary."

So the chapel was hired, and the second chapter of Methodism at Mattishall began.

Robert Key planned himself for the first three Sundays. At the first service only a handful of people were present, but in the evening the place was full. Before the third Sunday had passed the Holy Spirit moved among the people, and as Key puts it, "the work broke out gloriously." A number of really wicked characters were soundly converted, and Key's faith in God and the Mattishall folk was abundantly vindicated.

In his book "Gospel among the Masses". Robert Key tells of an incident at Mattishall that illustrates the opposition he encountered and also the sort of man he was—

"One Sunday, after a very powerful camp meeting at North Tuddenham, a love-feast was held in the chapel of a remarkable character. A very wicked man, at the public house on that day, laid a wager that he would be at the love-feast. He came, much the worse for drink, with a number of others of the same class, and forcibly passed the two men appointed as doorkeepers. I told him to go out.

He replied 'I will not.'

I said 'My friend, you had better go home to bed.'

He replied, 'I shall not for you.'

I then calmly went down from the pulpit, told the doorkeepers to open both doors and taking the fellow by his breech with one hand, and my fingers fast hold of the back of his neck with the other—as the chapel stands a few feet above the level—I sent him spinning to the other side of the road into the hedge."

This was one of Key's ways of casting out devils!

The love-feast continued and the power of God was felt so strongly that the preacher said he had never witnessed such a scene.

There is little wonder that folk came from far and near to hear the evangelist and under his piercing eyes and powerful words many were converted and led by this same man to Christ with the tenderness of a woman. The converts returned to their homes, proclaimed what God had done for them, and started societies in their own parishes. In a matter of months—not years—Mattishall became the head of a large and strong circuit, with Key living there as superintendent with a salary of 12s. 0d. per week.

The amazing drive and zeal of this newly-formed circuit is shown in that it soon had regular preaching at fifty places in Mid-Norfolk, had started a mission at Newmarket, spreading into Wisbech, Holbeach and Waplode.

When Key left the circuit in 1834, there were forty churches with four chapels, four travelling preachers, 35 local preachers, and 715 members. All this had been done in four years, and had not cost the North Walsham circuit 5s. 0d. As Key said, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

The following is the Mattishall circuit's report of its departing founder:-

"1834 Robert Key. Married man. No family. Aged 30. Taken out by the Yarmouth circuit; travelled 6 months on the Yarmouth circuit, 6 months on the Fakenham circuit, 3 years 3 months on the North Walsham circuit, and 2 years 3 months in the Mattishall circuit. His preaching talents are very good. He preaches the doctrines of a present, free and full salvation with great success. Hundreds of souls have been converted under his ministry in this circuit. He is very attentive to discipline and every other branch of his office—not addicted to over long preaching. A very laborious man. His general conduct with us has been exceedingly good—He smokes tobacco."

One of Key's helpers at Mattishall was a young woman, five years his junior, named Elizabeth Bultitude. She was one of the outstanding women of Primitive Methodism. A photograph of her is given in "A Methodist Pageant." Wearing a ric-rac trimmed bonnet tied with a large bow beneath her ample chin, her face has a most stern, forbidding look, but she was a woman of great faith and a high sense of duty. In a note on her death the Conference of 1891 reminded the Connexion that "the gifts of the Spirit were without distinction of sex." She was converted at a camp meeting in 1832. She laboured strenuously for thirty years throughout the country.

The first report of her on the Mattishall circuit is given for its historical interest:-

"Elizabeth Bultitude Aged 25. Taken out by the Norwich circuit has laboured with us one year. Her preaching talents are improving. She preaches a present, and full salvation with success. She is a general family visitor. Her preaching is generally accepted. Her conduct with us has been good."

Other helpers of Key were Messrs. Budley, Bowthorpe and Clarke. In 1832 the combined salaries of the four preachers amounted to £14.19.0 per quarter.

The places and membership of the Mattishall circuit shortly after the Rev. Key left are:-

1836			
Places	Membership	Places	Membership
Mattishall	40	Mattishall Burgh	14
Cawston Town	11	Cawston Eastgate	11
Whitwell Street	23	Whitwell Beck	15
Swannington	20	Hockering	33
N. Tuddenham	37	E. Tuddenham	13
Lenwade	11	Booton	12
Weston	15	Barnham Broom	10
Etling Green	11	Elsing	9
Sparham	9	Whinburgh	8
Westfield	18	Garvestone	14
Bawdeswell	36	Morley	8
Gressenhall	14	Dereham Town	12
Swanton	14	Yaxham	6
Attlebridge	7	Hoe	4
Lyng Town	—	Runhall	17
Bylaugh	4	Brandestone Com.	9
Easton	5	Newmarket Mission	76
Horsford	16		

Other preaching places about this time include Welgate, Reephams, Reymerstone, Scarning, Rotten Row, Northall Green, Lyng East-haugh and Shipdham.

The health of the circuit changed from year to year—almost from quarter to quarter. Membership fluctuated greatly. The 715 members whom Key left, had dropped to 369 five years later; by 1843 there were 530, and the next year 780—an increase of 250 in twelve months. The list of preaching places varied considerably, often because preaching rooms were denied, or because of secessions to other denominations, and, of course,

persecution drove many away.

In 1833, it was reported that "At Barnham Broom, where we had a society of ten members, the parson turned us out of our preaching house and even denied us the liberty of preaching in the open air. At Weston where we had nine members we have been deprived of a house to preach in. At Brandestone where we had eight members, it is the same, and at Booton where we had six members, it is just the same."

The contempt in which the "Ranters" were held by most influential people encouraged hooliganism, and in 1841 the Mattisham quarterly meeting resolved that "Etling Green camp meeting be removed to the Nathard (? Neatherd) providing that Carnal Okes will send us the police to protect us."

The same Carnal Okes was also thanked for providing protection at Shipdham.

One wonders if "Carnal" is the result of a spelling tussle with "colonel". Anyway it is often pronounced like that in Norfolk.

Shortage of money was a constant embarrassment in those early days, for rural Primitive Methodism had few wealthy followers. It was to the masses that Key preached—the masses living on paltry wages, and hovering precariously on the borderline of starvation. Hunger sat in the Sunday Schools among the children, in the pews among the people, and often climbed into the pulpit with the preacher.

In 1839, there was a grave circuit debt. The preachers' salaries were only partly met, and it is recorded that "Bro. Betts and Bro. Wonford had to go away without their last fortnight's pay after the June Qtr. Day." And further in the same report . . . "Our Qtr. Day dinners we have endeavoured to do away with and for near three years we have reduced it down to Bread and Cheese and a little **whom** brewed beer . . . The source of our deficiency is owing (1) to the extreme poverty of the principal part of our circuit. (2) The burden of our Newmarket Mission what have taken from the Circuit when there have been a sufficiency from £2 to well nigh £2.10.0."

The next year things had improved greatly and we read:—**"March, 1840. Circuit Report.**

Consider circuit to be in a most excellent state . . . December Qtr. suffered much through the failure of our first preacher. Three months elapsed before we could get a proper supply during which time there was an awful falling off in the congrega-

tions and members. At length we received Elizabeth Bultitude from the Saham circuit. Thank the Lord we have surmounted all diff. and that last three months God hath poured out His spirit in a wonderful manner and scores have been saved through the blood of the covenant and already good work is going on. Our chapels are in a flourishing state, our Sunday Schools are improving, some of the scholars have become teachers and honourable members in the connexion. We have built a substantial schoolroom at Wisbech contiguous with our chapel, have built one small connexional chapel at Walpole Marsh and have also bought a chapel and 2 cottages at Whaplode and we are building two more chapels on the circuit during the year. We have lost nearly 100 members, 50 have fallen, 25 removed for non-attendance, 10 removed to diff. parts of the Kingdom, 7 deaths, 6 doubtful cases, total 98. Thank God we have filled up the ranks and have a good increase of 60 on the circuit. We stand as follows, 460 full, 30 on trial, 6 doubtful, 3 travelling and 48 local preachers, 17 connex. chapels, 3 cottages and one schoolroom. Our mission in Huntingdonshire is doing well, we have 80 approved members and 20 on trial, total 100. Increase 50, 4 local preachers, 3 chapels. We have much land before us.

We attribute our prosperity to the Divine blessing upon the united and harmonious labours of our travelling and local preachers and leaders who have laboured with the heart of one man. 2. To a strict adherence to the discipline of the Connexion."

In the "Hungry Forties" the circuit was often in grave difficulty. Once it had to borrow £5 from the kindly Mr. Bates, donor of many circuit dinners, and then plan how it could scrape the money together to repay him.

Requests from other places for money to build chapels had to be refused—1843. Request from Stowmarket circuit. "On account of the embarrassed state of our circuit at this time we cannot help them; if we could we would."

Wages were very low but food, especially bread, rose to almost famine prices. Yet it was with the pence of the poor—the pence earned by gruelling toil in the fields, that our chapels and Sunday Schools were built. If we remember this, we can look beyond the plainness, or even ugliness, of some of the buildings to see the beauty of the sacrifice that made these people give out of their poverty to build a place of worship. And He who esteemed the widow's mite above the offering of the rich has owned them as His tabernacles.

The Newmarket Mission

While Robert Key was at Mattishall a mission was started at Newmarket. The work was bitterly opposed and progress was slow. The following extracts from the journal of John Bunn, one of the circuit's travelling preachers, tell of the difficulties our forefathers had to overcome, and are worthy of remembrance.

"June 18, 1837. Preached the farewell sermon to my friends at Norwich.

July 1st. I arrived at Newmarket. All hell seemed to be let loose upon me. I passed some time seated under an old hedge by the race course, before I made enquiry about a home. I sat musing and weeping. Fain would I have sung; but the response of the weeping heart is, 'How can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

July 2nd. I am stationed in a shattered mission, situated in a sporting county.

July 4th. Preached at Saxon Street. Much contempt was poured upon me, and no one would ask me to eat or drink, or have a night's lodging. I felt the trial, but looked to Heaven for help.

July 7th. Preached at Snailwell. I have now been round the mission and am sorry to say, that though this mission has cost a deal of money, and the preachers have suffered much during nearly three years, yet there are but three places, and about thirty members; and not one local preacher; and the prospect of establishing a cause in these parts is dark and cheerless. Oh! What a land of cruelty and crime is this!

July 9th. This day I had no dinner. I seated myself under a hedge and wept while reflecting on the hardness of the people's hearts.

July 20th. Walked 20 miles, and preached at Snailwell, and felt an opening with Heaven.

July 25th. Preached at Heaverhill; and while devotionally engaged some large stones were thrown; but none touched me. The persecutors then pulled some thatch from an old house, and threw it on me. I that night preached salvation for sinners, though covered with dirt. It will not do to study the science of retreating. The war is sharp.

Sept. 14. Preached at Newmarket afternoon and evening. While preaching in the evening a rebellious party burst open the door and threw a live cat at me. The congregation were

so disturbed that I closed the service. What a wretched place is Newmarket. Our members worship in fear. But God can save the place.

Sept. 25. Preached anniversary sermons at Finsham chapel. Monday, quarter day at Mattishall. The circuit and its mission appeared to be low financially and spiritually. The circuit appears to be unable to support the mission in the way it calls for. The preachers have laboured quarter after quarter with a part only of their salaries; and they have been at great expense, for in this country things are higher than Norfolk. I have no doubt but some of the warm hearted brethren in the circuit, are anxious to do good to the inhabitants of Newmarket, but living forty miles from it, they cannot assist with local help.

Dec. 11. Set off to attend quarter day, a journey of more than forty miles. The circuit and mission were found to be a little on the rise. "Lo the promise of the shower. Drops already from above."

April 21, 1838. I appeared before the magistrates to seek legal redress as neither I nor any of our members were allowed to worship in any of our houses, nor even to walk through the streets without being dangerously insulted. It was with difficulty that I compelled the bench to do their duty . . . The case was decided in my favour. But they said I must not preach in the Market Place any more, for if I did I should be taken up.

May 20. Preached at Chevely. Here some of our members have been compelled either to sign a paper not to let Bunn or any of his set come near their houses or else lose their work. I preached at Newmarket. Opposition is great at every place in this mission. My cross is heavy.

May 25. The constable of the parish of Mildenhall brought me a summons to attend a bench of justices to answer a charge made by a constable for obstructing the highway.

May 27th, Sunday. After much deliberation and prayer I felt it my duty to go into the market place again and hundreds flocked to hear. Some depraved creatures strove to drive me from my station by showers of rotten eggs, but they could not do it.

June 1. I had to meet the magistrates. Bros. Wainwright, Lucas Winkfield and Wonfor, accompanied me, and heard the trial. My brethren were aware I had violated no law and when I made my defence the magistrates seemed struck, and looked at each other. They however committed me to Bury jail for ten days.

June 30. I have now been about twelve months labouring with many a heartache; sometimes without food and without a bed to lie on, in showers of stones and rotten eggs; once received a blow on my head, which caused me to bleed profusely; in bonds and imprisonment for Christ's sake; and though some have fallen through the threats and persecutions of the enemy, yet, thank God, we have 55 members, with 4 local preachers and we contemplate building a Connexional chapel."

John Bunn received a letter of encouragement from the Connexional General Committee.

The Circuit Report in March, 1839, said "Our new mission still struggles with difficulties, but is improving. The past has been one of great suffering to our Bro. Bunn."

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Some doings and misdoings on the Circuit

There is in existence an octavo, parchment-bound Minute Book of the Mattishall Circuit. It contains the disbursements of the circuit from 1832-37 and the Local Preachers' and Quarterly Meeting records from September 1837-June 1855.

The pages are full of interest, and as we read the record of bygone Quarter Days we see something of the difficulties they had to face, and the faith that sustained them. Those Minutes contain many sidelights on the past and many human touches, so that it is easy to imagine the men and women who filled the pulpits, formed the congregations and met quarterly to transact the business of this big circuit more than 100 years ago.

In those early years Quarter Days were days of considerable importance for at one time preaching was carried on in 50 places and an organisation covering hundreds of square miles was being built up. From Cawston to Barnham Broom; from Gressenhall to Horsford, came the members of the Board—mostly on foot. From Newmarket, forty miles away, came the Travelling Preacher to report on the Mission.

There was much to be done, and the sittings were prolonged—often adjourned for completion. A timekeeper was appointed and every time the minute hand of the clock came round to XII he called "Prayer", and the president called upon a member to pray.

Dinner was provided at Circuit expense—unless one of the few wealthy members gave it. In 1832, the dinner bill was £15.6, in 1837 it was £24.0, a sign of growing membership or appetites! The meal could not have been simpler for in 1839 we read "That the ensuing Quarter Day should be at Mattishall, and a bread and cheese dinner provided." The next year it was decided "That a dinner be provided for next Quarter Day, but no beer." Already the members were feeling the need to challenge without any uncertainty the evil that was responsible for so much of the squalor in the villages.

In many respects the business transacted was the same as today, but more matters were decided by the Board. Specials, such as Sunday School and chapel anniversaries, camp meetings, protracted meetings and love feasts, were arranged or authorised by the Quarterly Meeting. "Protracted meetings" were introduced about 1840 and consisted of evangelical meetings held on eight or more successive evenings.

Rented seats were, of course, the rule, and a reminder of this now happily almost extinct practice is found in a minute of 1838 authorising Cawston chapel to have the two back seats "franchised", and a gate to part the Free Seats.

It was not easy to find houses or lodgings for ministers, and one Quarter Day decided "That the married preacher be requested to lodge the single preacher, and if he complies with such request he have 5s. 0d. per quarter."—This works out at 4½d. per week!

The Local Preachers' Meeting was very concerned about neglect of appointments. It was made a rule "That the preachers who wilfully neglect their appointments, shall, for such neglect, sink one figure on the plan." This may seem severe but neglect of appointments was repeatedly said to be the cause of membership decreases.

At the L.P. meeting in 1842 practically every Minute was of a disciplinary nature:-

1. One brother was removed from the plan for various reasons including that of "going to America without informing his wife."

2. One of the Travelling Preachers was reprimanded for boxing his son's ears too soundly.

3. A preacher was suspended for six months for "wasting time sitting in a public house."

4. Four preachers did "sink one place" and one sister "two places."

5. Another preacher was admonished for agitating the Bawdeswell society.

Discipline also occupied the time of the Full Board. Bro. X had neglected his appointments and when his case was discussed it was felt that he was justified in staying from an appointment through having a sore foot, but he was reprimanded for neglecting another appointment because of rain.

It was also very tactfully and nicely resolved at a later meeting "that Bro. X. Y. Z. be requested to search his plan more minutely in future." Another preacher had to be cautioned twice about his long preaching, and also taken to task for "reprimanding his brethren's preaching."

In the early "forties" there was an unfortunate "boy and girl" affair between two members in which the girl felt herself unjustly jilted. A committee was appointed to investigate and attempt a reconciliation. It reported "It is the opinion of this committee that both Mr. A. and Miss B. have been wrong in their courting affairs and they are recommended to bury and suppress their grievances and to sincerely repent and do better in future." If, in these enlightened times, the Quarterly Meeting took such a close interest in the courting affairs of the young people and appointed committees to investigate all the broken romances we feel they would be kept very busy.

The circuit certainly kept its travelling preachers busy for when one of them wanted to launch out upon the seas of matrimony Quarter Day recommended that Bro. . . . be given two days liberty to go and get married.

The Quarterly Meeting expressed itself very strongly about an unknown person who stole the quarterage from the Gresham representative on his way to the meeting, and called him "a sink-hole thief." They made up the loss to the distressed member.

The Mattishall circuit had many fine local preachers, but none better than William Lane of Hockering who had been converted by Robert Key. Lane was a really rough character, a terror to the locality, but from that rough material the Holy Spirit fashioned a grand Christian. Within a month of hearing Key, Lane was converted and soon became a preacher—a great preacher. Some good judges thought that if he had been blessed with religious training and properly educated he would have ranked among the best preachers of his generation. But with Lane, as with Robert Key, had they received a first-class education they would have lost that intimate contact with the labouring folk that God knew was essential to win the Norfolk villages for Christ. When Lane died in 1843 the Quarter-

ly Meeting instructed the Travelling Preachers to "improve" his death at as many places as possible, for William Lane, the one-time terror of his parish, was beloved throughout Mid-Norfolk.

In 1843, Bro. Ward, a Travelling Preacher, was moved from Mattishall to a house at Dereham. This was strongly resented by some of the society, and unpleasantness and a fall in membership resulted. The Quarterly Meeting of March, 1845, was the last of the Mattishall Circuit, and Dereham became the head place and the Circuit was renamed. The Mattishall circuit had existed for fourteen years.

Membership as shown at the March meetings had been as follows:-

1832	412	1837	483	1842	?
3	410	8	387	3	539
4	715	9	369	4	780
5	683	1840	540	5	567
6	520	1	310		

The Mattishall circuit was in the Norwich District and the state of this District in March, 1840, may be of interest.

Circuit	Members	S.S. Scholars	Circuit	Members	S.S. Scholars
Norwich	730	474	Fakenham	633	168
Lynn	920	757	Yarmouth	860	251
Upwell	470	384	N'th Walsham	390	—
Brandon	954	—	Mattishall	410	141
Wisbech	596	553	Wangford	528	248
Rockland	415	139	Aylsham	202	41
Swaffham	299	56	Ipswich	405	22
Cambridge	310	159	Hadleigh	220	34
Stow Market	150	28	Peterborough	140	45

Totals: Members 8629 S.S. Scholars 3500

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One Hundred Years of Growth

About 1852, the chapel hired by the Mattishall society was sold and the local clergyman bought it, in order, so it was said, to get the Methodists out of the parish. But the society secured a site within a stone's throw of the church, and built a small schoolroom. Mr. Bates of Dereham later bought the schoolroom with other property. He pulled down the old building and erected a chapel 36 ft. long by 20 ft. wide. The society fitted it up with a pulpit and 90 "Letable rail-back seats, hatpegs and other necessities." On Sunday, 27th July, 1856, it was opened and hundreds gathered for the occasion. Seventy of the seats were let straight away and the debt cleared.

In 1858, Clare Fisher was appointed assistant class leader, this was the beginning of a life of service for the local cause. In 1862, Elizabeth Bultitude returned and took the chapel anniversary. The following year the Sunday School was re-organised by Bro. Lowe.

Some members of the present society can remember services held in this chapel and the wonderful prayer meetings that usually followed the evening service. At these meetings the power of God was so evident that sixty or seventy years later they are recalled with joy and thanksgiving.

In the 1880's, Miss Grace Knowles, a converted actress, missioned Mattishall with such outstanding success that the chapel was packed throughout the mission and there was a very large number of conversions. This woman evangelist worked for some time in Mid-Norfolk, and was so used of God that scores of people on the circuit were brought into the Kingdom.

By the end of the century the chapel was too small for the congregations—in 1895 membership reached 70—and it was decided to build another. A site was bought for something over £80 on the main road. Some old property was pulled down and the present chapel and schoolroom built. Mr. Lebbell King, a beloved member of the society, was the builder, and Mr. Kerridge, of Messrs. Kerridge & Son, Wisbech, the architect. The cost was £700. The foundation stone was laid on Easter Monday, 16th April, 1900. The superintendent minister, Rev. G. Edwards, presided; Rev. G. Parkin, B.D., Principal of Manchester Theological College, gave the address, and His Honour Judge Willis, read the lesson. Mr. F. W. Wilson, M.P., laid the first stone. Heavy rain interfered so

that half way through the ceremony shelter was taken in the parish schoolroom. The stone-laying of the school took place on Whit-Monday, 4th June, the same year.

At that time Messrs. R. Southgate and G. Horne were society stewards and membership stood at 50. The local preachers were:-

- 8 G. Horne,
- 11 L. King,
- 14 Mrs. S. King,
- 19 W. Horne,
- 23 — Tuttle,
- 29 J. Juby,
- 31 J. Graves,
- 38 W. Lusher.

The Society made good use of the new buildings and continued to witness not only inside but outside. Camp meetings were held regularly, sometimes twice a year, people coming from miles around. For some years Mattishall had the largest membership on the circuit, and in 1927 a membership of 63 was recorded.

In the last 50 years Mattishall has been in the forefront of evangelical work in the district. Not only have the society's preachers been out Sunday by Sunday, but its members have strongly supported and in some cases sustained other Methodist societies on the circuit. Mr. and Mrs. Wesley Lusher have for many years gone from Mattishall to Hockering to maintain a Nonconformist witness in that parish.

Sunday School work is rarely spectacular, but from Mattishall men and women have gone into all parts of the country, and indeed the world with a sound instruction in the Faith, and the present cause is a testimony to the work of Spirit-filled Sunday School workers. Mr. Herbert Leveridge is the superintendent.

Members of this Methodist society have been called by the Holy Spirit to the ministry and to missionary work; Rev. John Norton; Pastor George Scott and Miss K. Horne are among those who have responded.

A notable feature of the Mattishall cause is the number and quality of its local preachers. Few other village churches in the county or possibly the country can claim such a proud record. For 120 years the unpaid, devoted preachers have tramped, cycled and motored throughout Mid-Norfolk preaching the

Gospel. In 1927 the society had 13 accredited local preachers. Today there are 11 preachers and preachers on trial. This is one-fifth of the circuit total, and represents about one preacher for every five members.

There are families in Mattishall with a preaching tradition of two, three and even four generations. In the case of the Horne family, Mr. George Horne received a "Note of Liberty" in Sept. 1865, his son, William Horne, became a preacher, his grandson, Arthur, followed, and now his great-grandson, Russell, is a preacher "On Trial".

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This is the story of Mattishall Methodism as the writer has been able to discover it, much more deserves to be written, of men and events but the dust of many years has buried names and deeds that would have stirred us to admiration. Nevertheless, looking back over this story we have seen many examples of what the Grace of God has done for ordinary folk, we have read the record of their simple faith, their loyalty to the local church, and their sacrificial efforts to extend the Kingdom. They lived not to acquire wealth, not to achieve fame, but to serve God; and in so doing they served their own generation and left us a goodly heritage. For what they did and what is still being done, let us say with Robert Key, "This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes."

END

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ALL PROFITS FOR CHURCH FUNDS