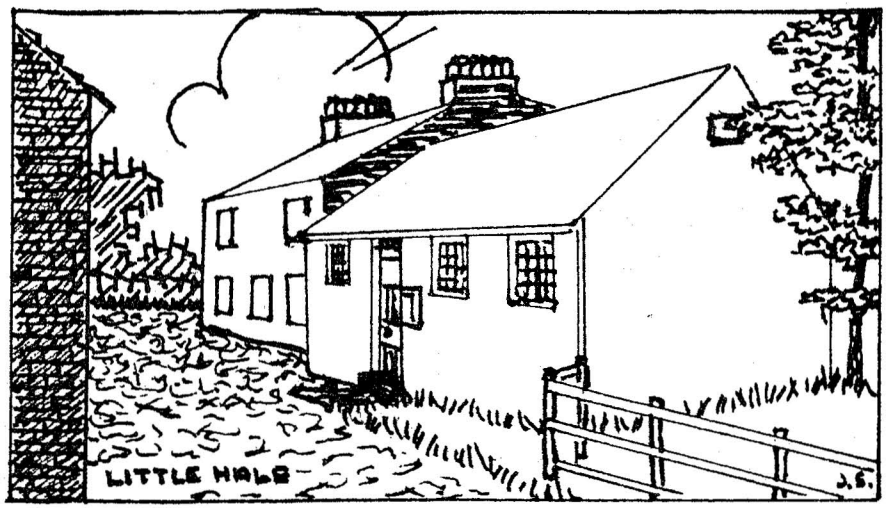


One small corner

the story of a fen edge chapel

and its background

to Mable Priestley

With thanks for your fellowship
in the gospel

D S Taylor

"ONE SMALL CORNER"

1837 - 1987

The Story of a Fen-edge Chapel and its background

A TRIBUTE

TO THE PEOPLE OF
LITTLE HALE METHODIST CHURCH
AND TO THEIR FATHERS IN THE FAITH

ON THE OCCASION OF ITS
150TH ANNIVERSARY

by

Donald S. Taylor

for

Joyce

the sharer of travelling years in many corners

Cover Drawing
by
Miss Jean Sargeant

PREFACE

A word of explanation is due for what may well seem the presumptuous scale of this extended essay in celebration of the 150th Anniversary of a village Chapel. Part of the reason is hinted at in the title - a desire to place "our" 150 years against the background of the unfolding story of this Fen-edge countryside. Part also lay in the realisation of how little is generally known today of the Primitive Methodism in which lay the roots of this particular Church, and this despite the new interest and new writing of recent years. Indeed the footnotes have been provided as much as signposts for the general reader who may wish to look for fuller treatment of the story as for the expert who may wish to check references.

Apart from my share in the common debt to that one-time Primitive Methodist Editor, President and Minister, H.B. Kendall (and to Dr. Williams's Library in making available the two volumes of his standard history) I owe most to Dr. R.W. Ambler of Hull University for his own writings and for his personal help. He pointed me in the direction of Spalding for Little Hale's buried beginnings, most helpfully guided my further reading and, above all, most generously made available so much in his own gathered notes and papers.

Thanks are due also to Mr. J. Clarke of Great Hale, Mr. J. Cook of Osbournby and the whole Priestley family of Little Hale for the recovery and passing on of records in private hands and now to be safeguarded in the County Archives, but particularly to Miss S. Priestley, B.A. for the 1841 Tithe Awards Map and Census information. Dr. G.A. Knight and the staff of the Lincolnshire Archives, and Mr. N. Leveritt, Curator of the Gentlemen's Society at Spalding, have been most helpful in giving their time and expertise, and I am grateful also for advice given by Mr. & Mrs. D.H. Rees and Mr. J.L. Nightingale, and for work done on the Sleaford Marriage Registers by Mr. R.S.R. Warnes, and to Mr. & Mrs. M.W.L. Brown of Quarrington for kindly access to past copies of the Sleaford "Gazette", and to our own Connexional Archivist for the Methodist Church, the Revd. W. Leary, for the provision of the dates of John Harrison's death and of Sarah Kirkland's second marriage.

Despite all this help many faults remain, doubtless of fact and of interpretation and most certainly of expression

They are my own and in mitigation I can only plead the shortness of time and the pressures peculiar to these closing months of active ministry. It did however seem worthwhile to try to get something out at this time, whatever the shortcomings, in the hope that it might encourage others to do better.

At times it has been a heavy task but always a rewarding one. I thank the Little Hale friends for their encouragement in it - and for their courage in undertaking the venture of publication. I thank Mrs. Thompson and the staff of Advance Publicity, Lincoln for carrying it through and taking so much of the load from my shoulders. Above all I thank God for the opportunity of thus offering a tribute to the work of his servants in this corner of his field. I do so, "in private duty bound", in pious memory of Phyllis Hannah Northwood and Frances Spark who respectively, in Australia in 1887 and in England in 1913 took the name Taylor and thenceforth shared their husband's travelling years in the Primitive Methodist Church.

I BEGINNINGS - A CORNER CALLED HALE

A motorist driving from Helpringham to Heckington will have to slow immediately he leaves the village for an awkward bridge over what seems to be a canal. If he looks at his Ordnance Map he will find it is a stream named North Beck; the local folk would tell him it is Helpringham Eau. Two sharp bends beyond and the road, leaving fields behind, passes through a scatter of houses, then open country again, with a cemetery on his right, before he reaches the houses (and bends) of Great Hale then the windmill and level crossing by Heckington Station. The driver may not even have noticed that the first group of houses after the bridge is Little Hale. He will hardly have been aware of crossing a mere ditch a bit further on. It might once have been a tributary of the Eau. The two streams, or at least the once greater prevalence of water they represent, may have a bearing on the meaning of the name Hale itself.

Heckington, where our traveller was bound, is the largest and most northerly of a string of villages stretching south to Bourne. They mark the line where the dip-slope of Lincolnshire's limestone belt gives way to the mixed soils and gravels at the edge of the Fens. Before any of these settlements had been made the Romans left their mark on

this countryside. About a mile east of this line they built the Carr Dyke, a canal linking the River Nene near Peterborough with the River Witham near Lincoln and providing transport for East Anglican grain and Lincolnshire salt bound to their northern garrisons. The Carr Dyke may have been of local benefit in drawing off some of the surface water but it was to be many centuries before the fen itself would be drained.

It was the Saxon, or more properly the Friesian invaders who first settled along this virtual inland shore. Heckington and Helpringham both have one of the oldest forms of their place names. Other names in this line of villages, like Haconby, are Danish; though that does not tell us whether the Danes founded the villages or just took them over and re-named them.

What about Hale? The name most probably comes from an Old English word HALH[1] which usually means a remote valley, a corner in the hills (or in the present instance in the fens). There is however another place name both English and Scandinavian HAUGH which is sometimes found as an alternative for HALH and has the meaning of "flat land by water". This would certainly fit the lie of the land. One writer has suggested however that Hale comes from a Danish word HALL signifying a tail of land sticking out into the sea (or again, here, the fens). We cannot be certain about the derivation, Danish or otherwise, but as to meaning, for us "corner" will do for now.

In this area Domesday Book knew only the one Hale. It lists no church there as it does at Helpringham and Heckington. This does not prove there was not one there and M.W. Barley[2] believes that the Saxo-Norman tower of Great Hale Church could date from fifty years either side of 1066. He also states that its style is one found in Danish settled areas of Lincolnshire. Moreover, again in distinction from both Helpringham and Heckington, the householders of Hale (apart from Ralf, Gilbert de Gant's "man") are all listed as "sokemen". This is virtually a freehold form of tenure, at its strongest in Lincolnshire, and thought again to be linked to the Danish settlement.

There are signs then, in the name, the church, the form of landholding that Hale could have been settled by Danes or taken over by them whether re-named or not, in the late tenth or early eleventh century. Saxon or Danish by Norman

times it had become a productive corner in the fen-side world. Its 36 "sokemen" suggest a population of 150 to 200.[3] Its taxable value is slightly larger than Heckington's despite the latter's 100 acres of pasture, 3 fisheries and a church. Also Domesday Hale has 15 plough teams (as against 10 at Heckington and 18 at Helpringham where there are indications of recently rising productivity). The fact that no pasture is listed at Hale does not imply a purely agrarian farming life. It probably means the fen pastures were unassigned and shared by several villages. Such "inter-commoning" was to give rise to later troubles in this area.[4]

The first clear evidence of there being a Little Hale comes a hundred years after Domesday with the appearance in the tax rolls first of Magna Hale then Parva Hal. Then in 1239 it is listed in the Acts of Bishop Grosseteste who grants a licence for a private chapel to its Lord of the Manor, Simon de Hal, knight.[5] Sometimes such chapels became "chapels of ease" for the village but here the wording seems designed to rule out such possibilities. The chapel is for Simon his domestic servants and guests, and even they must go to the mother church at Great Hale to worship and pay their dues on the five great feasts and lesser local ones.

The fact that this licence was addressed to the Abbott of Bardney as well as to the Rector and the Vicar of Great Hale is a reminder that the proprietal rights of churches were part of the feudal system. They could be assigned, along with their tithes and dues, by the landowner to the support of monastries and other causes. Gilbert de Gant, the great encourager of Gilbert of Sempringham and the Domesday holder of Heckington and Hale among much else, refounded Bardney Abbey to which Heckington Church was given. In 1208 Simon de Gant gave Great Hale Church to what was probably a leper hospital - the Church of St. Lazarus-without-the-walls of Jerusalem.[6] In 1345 Bardney obtained the King's licence to appropriate the church at Hale.[7] This form of support for good work in one direction meant deprivation in another. It bespeaks a measure of neglect for the church in the countryside.

II NEW CROPS - PREPARING THE LAND

The monastries, like almost every form of Christian organization through the centuries, may be accused of supplying the religious needs of the countryside with a second-rate service. Yet the monastries built up that countryside. They gave Lincolnshire its great glories of sheep and churches.[1] Their wool trade made Boston a great port.[2] At first glance fen commons might be thought too wet for sheep but from an early date they were used for summer fattening of upland flocks. In 1640 Wildmoor Fen alone was said to carry 30,000 sheep as well as 2,000 horses not to mention the abundance of wild fowl that was so much a part of the region's way of life.[3] Even when the wool trade fell off, the monastries were destroyed and the Tudors had departed and the Norfolk system of rotating crops was being established elsewhere there were no great changes here.

Then James I began to talk of draining the fens and Charles I, looking for money free of Parliamentary strings, began to act. To the fen men of Lincolnshire this was a more grievous threat than his Ship money. They took up the cudgels with pen and with fist, arguing the case for the productivity of their lands and overthrowing drainage workings. 1640 which saw the plea for Wildmoor Fen quoted already also saw riots in Great Hale among many places.[4] Charles I defended his "undertakers" from the lawsuits of the gentry by the counterpressures of Star Chamber and from the physical battery of peasants by the counterforce of militia. By 1634 Earl Lindsey had already drained the fens between Kyme Fen and the River Glen at a cost of £5,000 and the loss of 12,000 acres of common.

The Civil War intervened. A victorious Parliament havered for a while. But inevitably drainage and enclosure went ahead. In 1765 the South Forty Foot drain was built and linked with an existing drain from Hale Fen to Boston. The advantages of the new husbandry began to be more widely appreciated and enclosures to be a matter of agreement in many places (including Little Hale).[5] The drainage system, however, was still afflicted with troubles: inadequate outfalls in the Wash, ineffective scouring of the full length of channel and the need for more efficient pumping of parish drains into the main channels than windmills could provide meant that much of this area remained "half-year land" until well into the nineteenth century. Every winter between 1795 and 1801 the Hale Fen flooded.[6]

By then war was producing other changes. The high price of corn while Napoleon was being defeated encouraged a widespread change to arable. This and also the wider use of horses instead of draught cattle meant more manpower was needed on the land. Between 1800 and 1851 the population of Lincolnshire doubled in the county as a whole and in such villages as Metheringham, North Kyme and Billinghay. The increase was not so great in the Hales - about 50% (Little Hale from 223 to 347). It was not only the rise in numbers but the greater variety of craft and trade which enriched village life. It was this social change which forms the background to the main part of our story.

Before turning to that, however, we must put on the larger map the state of English religion at this time, especially as it affected Methodism. The death of John Wesley in 1791 came two years before the assassination of the French royal family marked the end of an era with the collapse of the main redoubt of the Old Order in Europe to the undermining wash of the new ideas that had been at work throughout most of the century.[7] England might escape the Revolution but there too, the days were long over when a unitary society could be sustained by a single creed.[8]

The conflict of ideas, radical and reactionary, was itself stirred by as well as stirring the tensions of the accelerating Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions. While Luddites smashed the machinery which threatened the old working life Levellers strove to win hearts and minds for Utopia. Religion was part of the turmoil: for some a bastion of the threatened constitution; for others the driving urge to build a New Jerusalem - and for others a haven and a refuge in troubled times. In the 1790's Christians in many areas were caught up into combined evangelical activity regardless alike of denominational label or political slant. County Associations were formed in Bedfordshire, Hampshire, Dorset and other regions in which whole towns and villages worked together to support the work of itinerant preachers.[9] Elsewhere, particularly in the towns and in the Manchester area the Presbyterian (becoming Unitarian) wing of Dissent was voicing opinions which seemed alike a threat to orthodoxy and to social order. As for Methodism, after Wesley's death despite the determined efforts of Church - Methodists in the leadership and up and down the land to see that it remained a church-within-the-Church of England the move towards a

separate existence though gradual was inevitable.[10] Yet as late as 1836 Conference declined to use recent legislation enabling the licencing of Methodist Chapels for marriages. Even in 1800, however, in many Anglican eyes it was impossible to see Methodism as anything other than the largest body of dissent, or dissent as anything other than disruptive.

In the countryside, no less than in the growing towns or the new factory regions, the real disruption had been at work some time. Enclosures and the improvement of agriculture began in the sixteenth century. Their acceleration in the eighteenth had already spelt out the capitalization of farming, the stratification of its human elements into owners, tenants and labourers to a considerable degree and the widespread impoverishment and social downgrading of once independent cottagers.[11] Moreover the one most visible social group to be enriched by these same processes was that of the Church of England clergy, now largely identified with the county gentry and indeed forming half the magistracy.[12]

In Lincolnshire at the turn of the century Bishop Pretyman-Tomline (one-time Tutor to Pitt and now his advisor on ecclesiastical affairs) produced a report from a hundred parishes of the diocese which was alarmist about the spread of revivalism in general and in particular about the work of itinerant preachers of the lower orders and the hot-house effect of cottage prayer meetings.[13] Alarm was still stronger in other places and the Bishop of Durham suggested a law to clamp down on the licensing of travelling preachers. This was dropped but in 1811 with new outbursts of Luddism in the Midlands stirring the alarm the Earl of Sidmouth, pushed by the Bishop of Gloucester, introduced just such a Bill.[14] It was defeated largely because of highly organised petitions organised among Dissent and in Methodism. But, though the following year a new Toleration Act was also passed, in the country at large the magistracy acted as if the Act had failed and the Bill succeeded.[15]

The Methodist Conference would no doubt have expelled Alexander Kilham[16] in 1794 apart from any desire to appease the Government but the loss of 5% of its membership to his followers in the New Connexion was no doubt made more palatable with the thought of producing a bill of health clean of radical infection. This, as much of the actual fear of radical opinion in some places and the conscientious belief in "subordination" as a Christian virtue, led to the

imposition of a highly politicised "no politics" rule and even to the downright abuse of ministerial authority.[17] Moreover Methodism also had its part in social change. The open-ended system of ministerial expenses which obtained at this time was inequable in its working, favouring the wealthier and more fashionable areas. It tended to build an informal "establishment" of preachers and trustees suspicious not only of radicalism in politics but of revivalism in religion.[18]

III ANOTHER CORNER - PRIMITIVE ROOTSTOCK

"Whereas in the year one thousand eight hundred and ten in England was begun under the ministry of Hugh Bourne of Bemersley in the Parish of Norton-in-the-Moors in the County of Stafford a society or connexion of Protestant Christians now called Primitive Methodists and by some called Ranters..."

So runs a phrase in the 1824 conveyance of land at Fulbeck in Lincolnshire to Samuel Atterby, Minister of the Connexion of Primitive Methodists and others. Just who were these Primitive Methodists?[1]

The spiritual revival from which they sprang was part of that turn of the century awakening of evangelical religion we have noted. It was essentially a home grown affair. Hugh Bourne's own conversion indeed was at his parent's farm at Bemersley in 1799 while he sat reading. In 1800 on Christmas morning he converted his cousin Daniel Shubotham in a one-to-one "conversation sermon". A revival followed at Harriseahead in which the very numbers compelled recourse to open-air preaching. All this is one strand of the story. Then there was the unnamed Stockport Revivalist whose invitation to a Love Feast at Congleton led to the conversion of William Clowes and the involvement of James Steele and which, as Kendal puts it "sounded the note of the Holiness Convention". Intertwined with both these strands are threads brightly coloured at times but hard to trace throughout their length; the "Magic Methodists" of Delamere Forest, the Quaker Methodists.

The imported element entered on Christmas Day 1805 with the arrival from the United States of Lorenzo Dow, "unattached Methodist" and spiritual comet whose orbit three times spanned America, Ireland and England. His details of the working of "Camp Meetings"[2] as a proven tool of the American

Revival led to two of these day-long open-air exercises in prayer and preaching on the moors at Mow Cop in 1807. In the previous century Francis Asbury had enthused over the Camp Meeting as "a battle-axe and weapon of war" but disapprovingly the Methodist Conference called it "highly improper" and the verdict became the signal for local disciplinary action when later the same year a third Camp Meeting was held at Norton-on-the-Moors.

No doubt there was some loss of zeal in the "modern Methodism" which had forsaken the out-of-doors. There was also dislike of the uncouth and the undisciplined in revivalism and fear of political consequences. No doubt also on the other side there was scant heed for regulations and even for the regular routine of church life. At all events the new wine burst the old skin. In 1810 Bourne and Clowes were dismissed from the parent body and that March became the recognised (though disputed) birthday of the new movement when they each became leaders of different separated classes. The birthday was disputed (by Clowes) because there was no recognisable body at that time. Only in May 1811 were the first Class Tickets issued and only on 13th February 1813 was the name Society of Primitive Methodists officially taken. Constitutional talks followed from which emerged the Rules of the Connexion in 1814. Then in 1819 a Preparatory Conference led to the first Annual Conference the following year.

Although the title "church" only came into official use in 1902 the connexional element was vital in leading this "unpremeditated union of revivalists" along the path of continued growth.[3] It was there because for all their differences with the parent body and with those who sometimes joined and sometimes left them the ruling spirit was that of Methodism and because as well as the concern for mission there was concern for the building up of the converted and a recognition of the need for that discipline which is inseparable from "discernment of the body".

The innate Methodism of this lay-led mission is seen in its very early recognition of the need to provide for travelling-preachers and its steadfast refusal to yield the principle to the "free-gospel" views of some of the freelance evangelists who joined in the work. Hugh Bourne was able to serve the church at his own expense but with William Clowes the case was different. Two volunteers

provided five shillings a week each to set him free from his journeyman potting. Since the half-week's work available at this time brought in twice as much this was no small sacrifice for him, or his wife.[4] From 1811 when the first Circuit was formed at Tunstall these charges were met in the usual way by contributions from the various churches to the Quarter Board. Cowes was assigned an allowance of 14s.0d a week and James Crawfoot the other supported travelling preacher 10s.6d. Kendal says the difference was due to the use of Clowes' house as a "preachers inn".

In 1811 as well as its two travelling preachers the Tunstall Circuit had 15 local preachers for its 17 places and 200 members. By 1842 when Bourne and Clowes retired the membership had risen to 15,625 in circuits spread through all England as well as parts of Wales, Scotland and Ireland and with two missionaries in America. In the Jubilee year of 1860 the membership was 182,114.

The first thirty years - what Kendal calls the Heroic Period - was the time of the Ranter. The approbrious word first used in the 17th Century of Quakers was now applied to the raucous singing and shouted praise and prayers of the travelling preacher and the crowd he gathered, first in the street or square, then in someone's kitchen, later in a hired room until a committed membership formed a society and the society raised its own preachers and, in due course its own building.

The outward movement from Tunstall was largely begun by the free-lance evangelism of John Benton in a string of Derbyshire villages.[5] Boyleston, where a chapel was built as early as 1811, was one of these, Murcaston another. Here in 1794 Sarah Kirkland had been born. Accepted as a local preacher she and Mary Hawksley of the same place were the connexion's first female travelling preachers.

It was Robert Winfield,[6] a small farmer of Amberston near Derby, who launched Sarah Kirkland on a larger ministry by inviting her to speak at a Love Feast at his own village. This led to another invitation, to Derby itself where she was the first preacher in what, briefly in 1816, became the second circuit. It was Winfield also who initiated Sarah's visit to Nottingham which she "opened" that Christmas. In 1817 Nottingham took over the lead of the second circuit and launched a mission into Leicester and Loughborough (which became the centre of the third circuit in 1819).

In 1818 there was only the one preaching plan listing the places of the Tunstall and Nottingham Circuits as two sections. Its list of preachers, starting with H. Bourne, W. Clowes and J. Benton included J. Wedgwood, J. Harrison and R. Winfield. Sarah Kirkland and Mary Hawksley appear on it only under their initials at the places where they are planned. That May, John Harrison was on the Leicester mission. An expected preacher failed to arrive. "S.K." was invited to preach. Harrison writing up the event in his journal describes her as "a female from Derbyshire" and goes on to say he had "never heard her preach with so much liberty and power".[7] That summer they were married. In 1821 he died of consumption, not before writing his name further into our story. In 1825 his widow married another pioneer, William Bembridge[8] - a name we shall also meet again.

In almost the same phrase which John Harrison had used of his future wife oral tradition at Fulbeck ascribes the opening of its work to "a woman from Derbyshire". We are coming back to our own corner of the field.

IV LINCOLNSHIRE INTAKE

The outward thrust of Primitive Methodism in 1817-1818 became known as the Great Revival.[1] Its spread was not only south from Nottingham to Loughborough and Leicester but east to the Trent Valley and up it to the north. In August 1817 John Wedgwood was arrested while preaching at Grantham market cross.[2] Scorning bail he was imprisoned. William Lockwood, who had immediately stepped into his place but did not share his scruples gave bail. He had a cooler reception of his own at Newark, however, when the fire-engine (fortunately lacking the punch of today's water-cannon) was turned on him.[3] In the end it was perhaps the Grantham magistrates (whose case against Wedgwood and Lockwood was dismissed) and the Newark vicar (who was left to pay for damages to the fire-engine) who were the more discomforted.

There was a more positive sequel. When news of Wedgwood's arrest reached Tunstall, William Clowes was sent to find out the facts. He arrived to find that Wedgwood had after all given bail - in order to lead a Camp Meeting at Buckminster. This Clowes joined in and he was impressed by the opportunities of the area and the work being done by "Benton Kirkland, Wedgwood and others".[4]

Grantham was to prove hard ground but at Newark things moved more swiftly. By February 1818 it was a preaching station on the Nottingham plan, that April, John Harrison was conducting a Love Feast there and ten years later the Newark Mercury was noting the "small but neat chapel on the Farndon Road" opened by the Primitive Methodists - and being markedly unimpressed by the strictures the event had drawn from the vicar.[5]

Meanwhile at Nottingham in 1817 a Mr. Woolhouse[6] on business from Hull, met Winfield and was taken to hear Sarah Kirkland. His report to his wife on getting home led her to go to Nottingham herself. Mrs. Woolhouse was hostess to a series of revivalist house meetings at Hull and she took with her two young men who had proved their usefulness there. She presented them to the Nottingham Quarterly Meeting and asked they be appointed as Travelling Preachers - and that a missionary be sent to Hull. There and then the young men were received into membership, made local preachers and "sent out" as travelling preachers. One of the two was Samuel Atterby[7], a native of Somercoates, by trade a shoemaker, whose name was to appear six years later on the chapel deed at Fulbeck as its minister.

As for the missionary, Winfield's own name was put forward but he dropped out of the race. Clowes himself agreed to step into the breach and so embarked on the most fruitful period of his ministry. Hull was to prove the most effective centre of evangelism in the connexion opening up not only the whole of the north but also initiating missions to London, Cornwall and Canada.[8] Two assistants were sent to Clowes the following year. They were John and Sarah Harrison now in double harness.[9]

"Going" and "being sent" were not simply matters of movement from one place to another. These were missionary journeys. Describing "the opening" of East Bridgeford, Kendal says: "It was just one of those quiet villages which because it happens to lie in the line of advance will have billetted, in its farm houses or cottages, the generals of the divisions which pass through it and make it their temporary headquarters."[10]

Just such a place was Fulbeck on the well-villaged route from Grantham to Lincoln, and to Hull. The first of the "generals" we know to have preached there was John Hallsworth. At Lincoln in 1820 he spoke of the opposition

he had found at Fulbeck "some years before". We also know that Sarah Kirkland, before going to Hull as Mrs. Harrison, was preaching in the Vale of Belvoir. It could be that she was first into Fulbeck, as into Derby and Nottingham, though we do not know.[11]

Fulbeck was soon drawn into the orbit of the Lincoln Circuit, formed after the successful mission of 1820. Ambler gives details of the Lincoln Plan for July - September 1821 and gives a full discussion of some of its implications for the pattern of Primitive Methodist activity in the area at this time. It covered 57 places - among them Scredington, Heckington, Ruskington, Timberland, Walcot, South Rauceby and Fulbeck. This South Lincolnshire end of the circuit was largely left in the hands of three preachers - apparently unpaid but full-time - Fieldsend, Knott and Ann Otter.[12] Some of these places, including Fulbeck, were taken up into the Balderton Circuit formed in 1824 and Fulbeck itself became the circuit town in 1833 with Balderton, Newark, Norton, Frieston, Ewerby, Ruskington, Timberland, Martin, Claypole, Welby and Rauceby under its wing.[13]

Fulbeck and Rauceby were the strongest places in this circuit. In 1834 they each paid more than £2 making about half the total circuit income of £10.2.0. Fulbeck had a membership of 47, Rauceby of 25. There was no other place with more than 20.[14] In South Rauceby the first licensed place of worship for the Primitive Methodists was the house of William Patman, a farmer. This was in 1821.[15] A chapel was built there (a long felt want) in 1834.

The recently recovered Fulbeck Minutes name some of the travelling preachers in the opening years of the new circuit.[16] John Woolley who died within three weeks of coming from Burton. Joseph Harrison who came from Loughborough as relief (not apparently related to John Harrison).[17] Sarah Cope, appointed his junior colleague in 1834 who was the first locally commissioned travelling preacher, Conference recording that Fulbeck "pledged" her that year (i.e. commended her as a fitting preacher and undertook to pay her salary).[18]

Efforts were soon being made to mission Sleaford. A large schoolroom was hired at a rent of 15s.0d a quarter (candles cost another 6s.0d). The work fluctuated and seems on the point of abandonment at times. It was quite customary for places to come on and go off the plan for years. There were

always far more "preaching stations" than actual societies, let alone chapels. A minute of 1836 reads: "That every place where there is no society be considered New Ground for missionary labours". And another, "That preachers come home at night from every Mission Place not over six miles from the circuit town".

At last the Sleaford Mission bore fruit. The first Primitive Methodist Chapel was built in Westgate in 1841 (with a preacher's house under the same roof at the back and a gallery for the Sunday School).[19] The Circuit was now divided into the Fulbeck, Newark and Sleaford branches with the married man at Sleaford which in 1843 became the Circuit Town.

Ironically that year saw the first drop in membership. The staff is reduced to two. The circuit is still struggling. Fulbeck and Welbourne are transferred to the Newark Branch and the Branch itself transferred to the Nottingham Circuit in 1844. In 1853 there is even a suggestion (which seems to be acted on temporarily) that the rest of the circuit become a branch of Lincoln.[20]

It is time for us too to return to Lincoln and find our link with Little Hale.

V LAUNCHING THE VENTURE AT LITTLE HALE

The link is provided in part by John Hallsworth who shared in the Mission to Lincoln in 1820 and had earlier preached at Fulbeck. Soon he was sent out with William Doughty and Francis Birch to mission a larger area to the south.[1] Francis Birch opened the work in Boston itself and Donington and as far west as Aslackby and Rippingale. Another early preacher in the area was William Wildbur, found at Heckington in 1819 and opening the first P.M. Chapel at Boston in West Street in 1824.

At Donington a Society was formed in 1832 and the Chapel opened on Christmas Day two years later.[2] It had an interesting financial aid - a tank holding 20 hogshead of water which was sold in the area to pay the lighting and heating bill.

In March 1835 Donington was head of a Branch of the Spalding Circuit consisting of Little London, Pinchbeck Fen, Higgett Bank, Bicker, Rippingale, Gosberton Clough and

Helpringham. In the accounts for that December, Little Hale is listed for the first time. It has 4 full members and 1 on trial and pays 6s.5d to the Quarter Board. (Helpringham with eight members paid 13s.3d [3].)

One of the travelling preachers whose name occurs in these early accounts is John Bembridge. We do not know whether he was related to William Bembridge, Sarah Kirkland's second husband or to the Lincolnshire farming family whose name occurs in the annals of Methodism at Walcot.[4] We do know that according to these accounts he was on short pay. They record a payment of £10.10.0 for 15 months. Two guineas a quarter was the recognised female preacher's allowance and Sleaford at this time were paying their single men the Conference recommended £4.10.0 a quarter.[5]

By March 1836 Little Hale's membership had risen to eleven (and its quarterly payment to 16s.3d).[6] The following year the membership was seventeen and by April 13th (when its licence for worship was signed) the chapel was built and almost immediately mortgaged for £60, presumably to pay the bills. The mortgage was discharged in 1860.[7]

The 1836 Deed conveyed to Trustees a piece of land ten yards by eight from Jonathan Green, victualler, for £10. The land was part of a garden occupied by William Ingall. Ingall and Green are both family names recurrent in the village census rolls and the Sunday School lists. It is often far from easy, however, to untangle the actual family connections. A John Green, grocer and draper, was to become the village postmaster. There were six trustees for the chapel, four of them labourers, two from Helpringham and two from Little Hale (John Baker and John Pell). One of the Helpringham men, Andrew Brumley[8] had been appointed a Prayer Leader in 1834 and was to become a local preacher although he was one of three trustees who could not sign their name. The other two trustees were a miller and baker from Donington and a groundkeeper from Donington Fen. John Bembridge, the Donington minister, signed the deed as witness not as a trustee as the minister had done at Fulbeck ten years earlier.[9]

In 1840 when Helpringham built their own chapel one of their members, William Audiss, a wheelwright, was appointed "manager" of Little Hale.[10] In this capacity he signed the entry for Little Hale in the religious census of 1851.[11] This describes the building as exclusively used for worship

and having 48 free sittings and 43 others. The average congregation is given as 60 for the afternoons and 70 at night though on the census day there were only 26 at night and 47 (with a further 10 Sabbath Scholars) in the afternoon. The population of the village was then 347.

Having at last got Primitive Methodism an to (or off) the ground at Little Hale we stand back to survey the landscape.

VI A LOOK ROUND THE FIELDS

Dr. R.W. Ambler reminds us that this period was one, not only of growth in population but of church growth for Nonconformity.[1]. In Kesteven between 1829 and 1851 the number of places licensed for non-Church of England worship had increased from 95 to 154. The number of Primitive Methodist centres rose from 10 to 31 and the number of their actual chapel buildings included in these figures from 3 to 19. Plainly the young connexion was doing well in proportion to its size. Equally plainly it was a minority among the forces of Dissent. The parent body of Methodism was well to the fore. We have noted above some of the early Wesleyan chapel building at Sleaford itself but the circuit records include extant licences for dwelling houses at Anwick (1804), Digby and Billinghay (1818), Leadenham and Caythorpe (1822), Great Hale (1824), Fulbeck (1838) and chapels at Heckington (1835) and Osbournby (1840). By 1839, only just over forty years after the first Methodist preaching in Sleaford, its Plan showed 32 places and 3 ministers. The adjective "Wesleyan" was used on the Plan for the first time in 1842.[2]

One of the family likenesses retained by the younger branch lay in the sale of church literature. The Wesleyan Plans for 1847 to 1850 mention the Wesleyan Magazine, Youth's Instructor, Christian Miscellany and Early Days as well as Hymn Books. In Primitive Methodism, Hugh Bourne had very early on taken over and revived the connexion's monthly magazine, and stipulated that all circuits must have a Book Steward. The Fulbeck Circuit's earliest records in the Lincolnshire Archives include the quarterly accounts kept by its Book Steward with the travelling preachers, for the sale of books in the period 1833 to

1844. As well as the Primitive Methodist Magazine and the Hymn Books (large 5/6, small 2/9) they list such titles as Lorenzo Dow, Nelson's Journals, History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion, The Cabin Boy and The Dairy Maid's Daughter (the last two we guess to be juvenile periodicals). The Children's Magazine, which began its connexional life in 1824 appears here in 1840 at 1d a copy - W. Gladding selling six and J. Bembridge seventy four.

Common again to Wesleyan and Primitive Methodism at this time was the general format of circuit plans which listed the names of the preaching places on the left and those of preachers on the right. The travelling preachers headed the list but with no other distinction until from 1847, on Sleaford's Wesleyan plan, the top names appear in capitals.[2] The following names were not arranged alphabetically or even (as in modern Methodism) in seniority but in some arcane order of capacity to preach or general good standing. Failure to keep appointments without sufficient excuse was visited by the demotion of the culprit by one place on the plan. Discipline in this matter, and the arrangement for the interviewing, and if need be reprimanding of preachers in connection with other offences, was exercised by the quarterly preachers' meeting - usually held at 11.00 a.m. and followed by the Full Board consisting of Stewards and Preachers. One difference between the two bodies becomes apparent here. It was not exceptional for travelling preachers (though not demoted) to be reprimanded in the Minutes, nor did the Superintendent - or any Minister - automatically take the chair of the quarterly meeting. Often, in the Fulbeck Minutes, one finds the Circuit Steward signing as "President" or a respected local preacher such as W. Audiss of Little Hale or Pidd White of Fulbeck.

The rapid spread of Primitive Methodism at this time was due not only to the fervour of its spirit but to the timeliness of its arrival. As W.R. Ward puts it, "..a complex of social and economic factors had created a demand among the poor for exactly what the connexion was able to offer - membership and fellowship in a community that esteemed the worth of individuals, that gave them purpose and that provided an alternative structure of values"[3] to that of the obsolescent rural culture. To put it another way, the Gospel was brought to labourers by labourers with directness, warmth, excitement and participation. The

labourer in the fields could soon find himself a labourer in prayer at the Love Feast or the Camp Meeting. Should he go on to become an exhorter, then a preacher, he would be a labourer indeed, travelling many miles on foot within the circuit for weeknight and Sunday services in all weathers. (The distances from Newark and Fulbeck to Timberland and Martin were such that preachers were given 2/6 for these appointments).[4]

Another advantage of Primitive Methodism, as against its own parent body, was that it was cut on leaner lines. Its chapels when built were smaller; it was not at first involved in the effort to mount overseas missions or sustain a major school building programme; it had fewer married travelling preachers (and used more women) and its salary scales were about half those of Wesleyanism.

Primitive Methodism itself in the opening years was under pressure from the "Free Gospelism" favoured by some of its unattached revivalists and Hugh Bourne was not without sympathies in that direction. This may partly account for his stringent ruling that if a travelling preacher was not successful enough for a circuit to be financially viable he should go without pay. The rule, we are told, was modified later but throughout the period of the Fulbeck Minutes there are references to late payment, part payment and non-payment of salaries and to preachers being given permission to beg for them (that is hold special collections at services).

Certain areas proved more fruitful ground than others for the seed of Primitive Methodism; in general, the country rather than the town and in particular, the sort of country parish where squire or clergyman was, for whatever reason, less likely than elsewhere to root out the seedlings of dissent. One type of this sort of area is referred to as the "open parish" and Little Hale would seem to be an example of this of the most extreme form.[5] It was some distance from the centre of the parish at Great Hale, moreover the vicar was an absentee with apparently only a curate for the two townships. The main landowner, the Marquis of Bristol, was also an absentee, as also were the next considerable holders, George Packe Esq. and the Rev. Henry Charles, while the rest of the township, leaving aside the owners of single plots, was divided among a further dozen owners, many of them also non-residents.[6]

This perhaps goes some way to explain why Little Hale Chapel was built before Helpringham's or Great Hale's (at both of which places there were also other nonconformist groups). Another factor in the virility of the Little Hale cause may perhaps be seen in the age profile of the township, as shown in the 1841 Census returns. In round figures (time has not allowed an accurate count) this shows 70 aged 0-10; 60 aged 11-20; 40 aged 21-30; 30 aged 31-40; 20 aged 41-50; 12 aged 51-60 and only 5 aged 61-70 and 2 over 70.[7]

Such a preponderance of youth, especially disadvantaged youth, could only be deemed an advantage because the form of Christianity being offered them had largely grown up with them and shared the same troubles but brought to bear on them a positive and urgent hope - what Clowes used to love to call the message of present salvation and present holiness. Such language, it is true, could be used in a very inward looking, world-forsaking way, but even at that it meant that man was no hapless victim of fate and that, if he could not change his circumstances he could himself be changed by grace to deal with them creatively and with courage. Moreover the mutual sharing of experience in the society class, in which all were urged to take part, meant a degree of encouragement of one another in the struggle of living which is a far cry from the cliché "opiate of the people" view which sees even the Primitive Methodist form of Christianity solely in terms of persuading people to put up with things. That element was there, for some form of "acceptance" is an essential part of Christianity in any form. But it did not stand alone, as shall see later in the story.

VII LITTLE HALE MOVES TO SLEAFORD

The accounts of the Donington Branch show that between 1837 and 1860 membership at Little Hale remained fairly steady with peaks of 29 in 1853 and 22 in 1859. Membership at this period, it should be remembered, meant being committed to weekly attendances at Society Class and the obligation of 1d a week Class Money. It represented only a small proportion of the Sunday congregations.

So far as Little Hale is concerned, the references in the Donington Minutes are to such routine matters as the fixing of dates for Chapel Anniversaries, Sunday School Sermons,

Tea Meetings and Missionary Services. These last were special evangelistic and fund raising efforts, mainly staffed by deputations from other circuits in the district. The money raised was the only source of Connexional funds for special enterprise, but it was often retained, at least in part, by circuits to sustain the local mission. One Minute of 1859 reminds us that life was developing its lighter side - a "Trip" to Frieston Shore is to be held on July 14th at 1s 6d a head (the current 2nd Class Excursion charge from Sleaford).

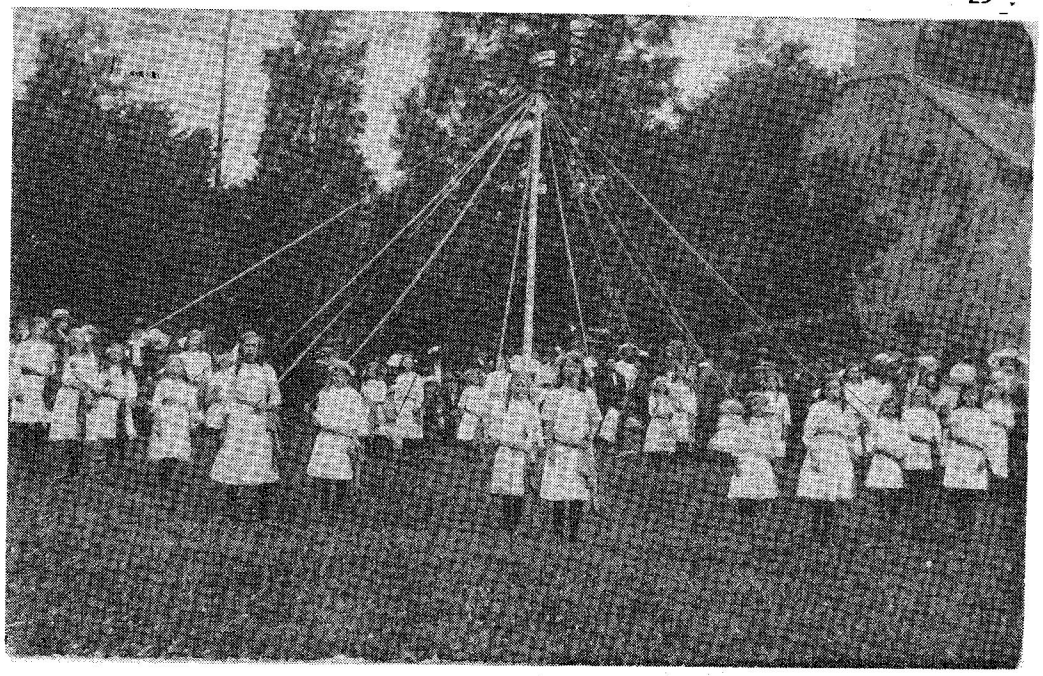
That same year the District Meeting was looking ahead to 1860 and the Connexion's Jubilee. It asked circuits for suggestions. Sleaford felt they had nothing to say. Donington, while making the point that there were "good enough preachers in the District" without importing any big guns did suggest a special train might be put on from Boston to Lincoln. Nothing seems to have come of that, though one of the travelling preachers was given leave to attend the District Celebrations on November 19th. Within the circuit Tea Meetings were held and at Little Hale a Camp Meeting drew a crowd of 2,000[1]. In Sleaford the special Camp Meeting was at Boiling Wells with several Love Feasts to follow.

The medallion struck at this time records the connexional statistics: Members 182,114; Travelling Preachers 675; Local Preachers 11,384; Class Leaders 1,803; Sunday School Teachers 30,988; Connexional Chapels 2,267; Rented Chapels 3,268; Sunday Schools 2,036. The Wesleyan Plan for 1847 provides some comparative figures: Members (Great Britain) 341,468; (total) 469,064; Ministers (Great Britain) 1,171 (total) 1,744; Sunday Schools 4,066; Sunday School Teachers 80,581.

By the time of the Jubilee another question was pressing. The way the movement had spread through the countryside with a maximum of local initiative and a minimum of central direction made it easy for overlapping areas to develop. The Sleaford and Donington Minutes both witness a desire to sort out the circuit boundaries. "We will give Billinghay and South Kyme to Coningsby", says Donington. "We will accept Scredington and Osbournby if offered," says Sleaford. There was also mutual help across the borders with the regular lending out of preachers, and in 1860 it is recorded at Sleaford that the Little Hale local preachers Audiss and Draper give two or three appointments

[continued on page 26...]

Sunday School Anniversary & Harvest Festival Mementos Late 19th Century
Above: John Parker (top row); Charles Priestley (near window)



Maypole dances from Sleaford in the field used for Camp Meetings
Sunday School - 1914