BILLY ROW CENTENARY METHODIST CHURCH

What follows is to some extent based on personal experience since this was the church that I attended as a child and adolescent for the ten years between 1942 and 1952. I went to the Sunday School, said my 'piece' at the Sunday School Anniversary, sang in the choir and participated in many of the activities that the church provided. Recently, as a professional historian, it has been my pleasure to be given access to material relating to that church and to some of the people who were central to its development and operation. Part of this material, the 'Eventide Memories and Recollections' of Henry Green, has just been produced as a separate publication by the Durham County Local History Society (Winifred Stokes (ed.), *Memoirs of a Primitive Methodist: Eventide Memories and Recollections by Henry Green (1855-1932)* (1997), available from DCLHS Publications Officer at £2.50 to members and £4.00 to non-members plus 50p per copy postage). Some of the rest of the material forms the basis of this article and of a subsequent one (which is to appear in Durham County Local History Society *Bulletin* 58) on mining life in the early part of this century. I am very grateful to Mrs. Joan Rossiter of Shiremoor, the present owner of the journals and diaries, for allowing me to use them, to her cousin Mrs. Audrey Eccleston of Durham for additional information and the photograph on which the illustration is based, and to Mr. P.R. Wiggans for transforming a rather murky photograph into an elegant line drawing.

The man who was the author of the 'Eventide Memories' and one of the chief supporters of the project for building a new chapel at Billy Row, Henry Green, was not Durham born. He was a Norfolk farm labourer from Sporle near Swaffham. He came from a Primitive Methodist background but he and his father were also associated with Joseph Arch's agricultural labourers' union. It was this association that forced him in 1871, at the age of sixteen, to leave Norfolk to join two older brothers and a sister who had already moved to the South Durham coalfield. Here he became a miner, married the daughter of Welsh Methodist 'incomers', and had two children, James Henry and Mary Alice. He also threw himself into the life of the Primitive Methodist communities in the area surrounding Crook, and finally settled at Roddymoor as a member of the Society based in Billy Row. He remained there until his death in 1932.

After his retirement in 1920 he decided, with the help of his brother John, to record for later generations of Methodists his impressions of preachers and ministers and other characters that he had come across. It is an edited version of what he wrote which has been published by the Durham County Local History Society.

When James Henry Green, son of Henry, retired in 1948 he decided to use the remaining pages of his father's large foolscap ledger-type book to write some recollections of his own. But his perspective was different; he had a wider, more objective, view of people and events and, despite his devout Methodism, a more secular approach. Also, by the time he started to write the community in which he had spent his life was being eroded by forces which could not be countered by religious energy. The South Durham coalfield was nearing the end of its working life.

Billy Row, despite being surrounded by pits, always retained some of its village character from a pre-industrial era even though it became subsumed as an outlying part of the town of Crook. David F. Neal in his little booklet, *The Story of Crook* (1996), hardly mentions it, yet when Parson and White compiled their *Gazetteer* in 1827 they described the places as joint townships. At that date the total population of the two villages was 228 and that included Sunniside which was then the name of a farm. In the 1841 census the combined population was 538 but by 1851 it had risen to 3,946; 2,211 males and 1,735 females. This disparity between the sexes represented an influx of young single men who began to arrive in the 1840s to work in the newly opened pits.

Coal had been extracted at Woodifield to the south of Crook since the middle ages but it was the development of the Stockton and Darlington railway and the westward extension of the Clarence network that made it worthwhile for speculators to develop more substantial collieries in the area. The coking property of the coal was appreciated by the ironmasters Bolckow and Vaughan, initially of Witton Park but from 1850 onwards based in Middlesbrough. Bolckow and Vaughan in the second half of the nineteenth century owned both White Lea and Woodifield collieries, while the Pease family, descendants of the original backers of the Stockton and Darlington railway, acquired Roddymoor colliery, which they renamed Peases West, and then went on to develop others further north. White Lea and Roddymoor collieries were both closer to Billy Row than they were to Crook, but the cokeworks which took a considerable proportion of their coal was nearer to Crook.

The employment provided by the collieries and the coke ovens initially drew in labour mainly from the adjacent mining areas of Durham and Northumberland but with a sprinkling from further afield. Then in the 1870s the demand for coke from the Teesside iron industry combined with a slump in agricultural prices brought workers from rural Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire as well as from declining extractive industries such as the lead mines of the North Pennines and the tin and copper mines of Cornwall. A massive extension of Bankfoot cokeworks to include by-product manufacture brought another influx in the 1880s.

This is the economic and social context within which Methodism of one sort or another expanded to become the 'established' religion of the area. Wesleyan Methodism reputedly came first to Billy Row from Weardale in 1773, and tradition had it that John Wesley himself preached on Billy Row Green, but there is no mention in Parson and White of a chapel building either at Crook or at Billy Row. Primitive Methodism came to Crook in 1822 when a travelling preacher, Francis Nathaniel Jersey, described as a sailor, who had accompanied one of the founding fathers of the Connexion, William Clowes, on a mission to the North-East, set up a Society there. Again there is no evidence of a building.[1] In 1840, however, after a Primitive Methodist Camp Meeting led by George Race of Westgate, the 'apostle of Weardale', there were signs of a more permanent establishment in Crook, although there is still no Society mentioned at Billy Row. Among the local preachers resident in the district at this time was the Chartist James Wilson, who was blacklisted for his part in the 1844 miners strike. He was largely responsible for the building of the first chapel in Crook, which subsequently became the Temperance Hall. In 1869 a new chapel seating 650 and costing £2000 was opened. The foundation stone was laid by Arthur Pease, a member of the partnership which owned

the collieries and coke ovens.[2] The Peases were relatively paternalistic employers who, in a spirit of enlightened self-interest, encouraged the provision of places of worship and institutions of rational recreation for their workforce.[3]

The standard works on Primitive Methodist history make no reference to Billy Row.[4] It is clear that from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards even in religious terms the ancient village was increasingly regarded as no more than an outlying district of the expanding town of Crook. But there must have been a Society there in the 1850s because in 1860 the Primitive Methodists are recorded as having built a chapel capable of seating 280 people, the land for which seems to have been set aside some years earlier.[5] James Green describes this chapel as being 'of the rising gallery type with no pretensions to architecture, and heated in winter by a coke stove on the flat of the chapel'. I have not been able to find any photographs of it to add to this description.

There were several religious revivals in Weardale in the 1860s, which may have spilled over into the Crook area as leadminers and their families moved down the dale.[6] The influx of labour in the following decade brought many such as the Greens from strongly Primitive Methodist rural Norfolk and Lincolnshire as well as from North Wales and Cornwall. The expansion of the cokeworks in the 1880s increased the demand for coal and the whole area experienced a period of expansion and relative prosperity. Further missions helped swell the congregations of the local chapels.

The extension of colliery housing at Roddymoor brought more recruits to the Billy Row Society.[7] For, although the owners provided a 'preaching room' on the estate, it was rented property and the Societies liked to control their own affairs. James Green came to live at Roddymoor at the age of eight in 1890. His father had become a member of the Billy Row Society in 1874 but, like many young miners, Henry Green had led a peripatetic existence for a number of years before finally settling down in Roddymoor and devoting his energies to Billy Row chapel.[8]

Central to the life of the chapel was the Sunday School, which in the last years of the nineteenth century reflected the demographic composition of the population. It met on Sunday mornings and according to James Green's account could muster up to a hundred children. There was also solid adult attendance at the other two services in the afternoon and evening, although it appears that by no means all those who attended were full members of the Society in the sense of holding membership tickets and attending class meetings. (For an explanation of what 'full' membership entailed and the institutional structure of Primitive Methodism see below). Nevertheless, as James Green notes, 'In the old P.M. circuit Billy Row was reckoned amongst the Solid Societies and some of the giants of Primitive Methodism preached in the old chapel'.

He continues: 'At the turn of the century - somewhere about the year 1905 the members and trustees toyed with the idea of a new chapel. At first there was a meeting to consider alterations to the old chapel and if I rightly recall it was the Rev. Thomas Elliott said, "Well why not go in for a new chapel?"'.

Thomas Elliott was the minister at the time. James does not mention here that his father was also one of the moving spirits in the venture. Revealingly he tells us that, despite its importance in the community, the Billy Row Society had only

> a little over thirty "full members" but they had faith and enthusiasm, when the idea took root in their minds. And so it came to pass that, after several meetings, concerts and money-raising schemes, the foundation stone of the new church was laid on 31 May 1907. George Race of Westgate in Weardale was the architect and he was also the clerk of works and he ... saw that those who did the building put in the best materials and workmanship.[9] The building took a considerable time to complete, but that was because the contractor - a Crook man, had not a reliable set of workmen and they spent a good bit of their time idling and drinking during working hours. Also the contractor himself was one that was addicted to drink.[10]

> During the interval of the demolition of the old chapel and the opening of the new one we held services in the old Temperance Hall Billy Row. At that time the Wesleyans held their Sunday School in the Temperance Hall in the afternoon so we could only have the School in the morning and the preaching service at night.[11]

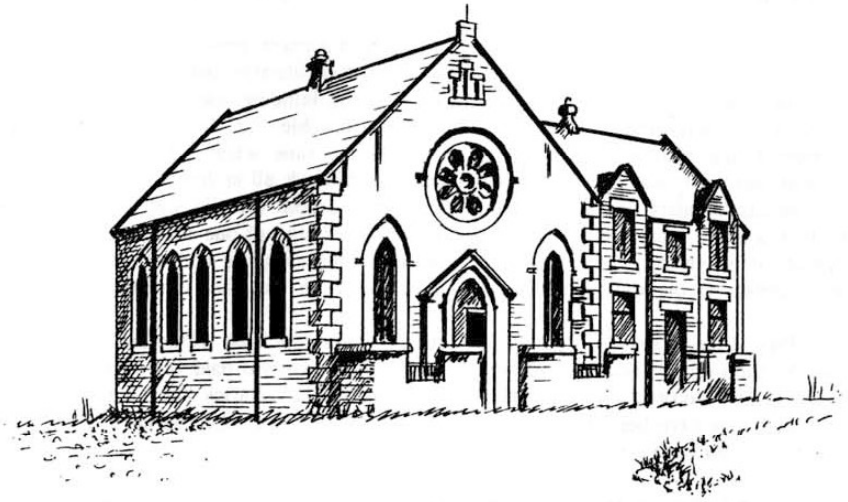
The new chapel was finally opened on 8 August 1908 and, like many others built in this period when Primitive Methodism was celebrating its hundred years of existence, it was called Centenary. The report of the opening ceremony published in the *Auckland Chronicle* the following week records 'In opening the beautiful little hillside church at Billy Row on Saturday Mr. Mein[12] said the spot was one full of hallowed associations for the Primitive Methodists of the district. It was in the old chapel on the foundations of which the new edifice has been erected that he preached his first sermon as a local preacher. It was there too that Rev. W.A. French received his first class ticket from the hands of Mr. Willie Dunn, at that time class leader at Billy Row. John Williamson whose name is almost a household word in the Brandon district which he represents on the Durham board of Guardians was a scholar at Billy Row. The place conjures up memories too for Councillor J.R. Hodgson for his father was one of the old trustees'.[13] The newspaper report ends, 'Men of a sound religious type have been trained at the old pace of worship and have served well their day and generation. It is expected that the new place will have a great religious power in the neighbourhood'.

James Green notes, 'H.J. Mein Esq. of Toft Hill Hall opened the door and Rev. T. Elliott preached the opening sermon to a crowded congregation'. He adds ruefully, 'I was not present at this first service in the new church. I was boiling the water for the great tea which followed the service. This tea was held in the Billy Row school. I boiled the water in a portable boiler in the school yard'.

The use of the local school, whose buildings still stand and which I attended in the 1940s, is interesting. Both James and his father write about the schoolmaster who, although not a Methodist, was sympathetic to the work that the Connexion did in the village and subscribed to the new building.

According to James' account the disruption caused by the demolition of the old chapel and the building of the new led to some loss of attendance.

> We did not have as good congregations nor yet the same kind of people. As I remember things as a youth there were several people who attended every service at the old chapel who were not members. Several of them never came to the new one.



Billy Row P.M. Chapel P.R.W. '97

So the congregation was largely a membership one. There was no choir initially. It was not until 1910 or 11 that a choir was formed and then it didn't function properly until 1912 when J. Scriven moved to Billy Row.[14] We gradually built up a strong church with a number of young people, when the first world war broke out and a number were called up. We managed to hold things together during the war and until the men returned from the fields of slaughter, and after some time, with our young folk growing up around us and linking themselves up in church work, we became one of the strongest churches in the Crook P.M. circuit.

From 1920 to 1926 we were on the crest of a wave, we could get as many as 50 people to a week night service ... At this time we had in our church 8 local preachers. [15]

This may well be the point at which to explain something of how the Primitive Methodist Connexion functioned. Its founders were individuals who were thrown out of established Wesleyan Methodism because they had used the Camp Meeting, an extension of Wesley's own mechanism of outdoor preaching to bring home to folk largely outside any organised religion the risk of damnation unless they changed their lifestyles and accepted the precepts laid down in the scriptures. It was the style of exhortation and the size of the audiences addressed at the initial meetings that scared the Wesleyan establishment rather than any theological divergence. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century the Primitive Methodists had developed an organisational set-up not unlike that of the Wesleyans and were the second strongest branch of Methodism.

The basic unit was the Class which was a sort of support group established to enable the newly converted member to maintain a Christian lifestyle and to bring him or her into the wider Society. The Society rather than the building was what constituted the 'Church'. There was a quarterly subscription payable for the Class ticket, which conferred full membership of the Society. At the time when Billy Row Centenary Chapel was built each Society was self-financing, although all in the Circuit paid towards the minister's salary and the provision of accommodation for him and his family. The Circuit was the local group of Societies under the charge of one minister. The Crook circuit, of which Billy Row was a part, included nine churches and stretched as far as Wolsingham to the west, Howden-le-Wear to the south and Tow Law to the north.

Part of the money to build the new chapel was raised from within the membership, part by fund-raising activity and part from a loan which was paid off over a period of years. James records loan repayments in one of his early diaries but not the recipient. The loan may have been from the central Chapel Aid Association set up in 1889 by the Connexion for such purposes. [16]

Granted the system of finance, every Society had an interest in extending its membership, but entry was contingent on a change of lifestyle and normally only achievable after the public recognition of one's sinful state and acceptance of the need for divine mercy and guidance. This was the experience known as 'conversion'. There were regular 'missions' aimed at bringing in new converts, and the Sunday School and Christian Endeavour movement [17] helped provide a pool of younger people who would hopefully become full participant adult members.

The significance of the nonconformist chapels for the assimilation and socialization of the diverse individuals, many of them young men from deprived backgrounds, who came into the South Durham coalfield in the second half of the nineteenth century cannot be over-estimated. By the time I arrived there in the early 1940s my inherited Primitive Methodism was about the only thing that gave me an entrée into what had become a very tightly knit community, bonded by intermarriage and shared experience although it was barely two generations old. The chapels had not only provided a social network for the earlier incomers but for young men and women of a generation raised before the 1870 Act they had frequently provided an education as well. Even after the national provision of 'elementary' education it was very difficult for those who had come in as miners or coke workers to find other employment for their sons in an area with a single industry economy. The chapels offered an 'alternative' career structure for men

trapped in low-paid manual jobs and even sometimes the means to escape. Methodist preachers and chapel officials were among the earliest Trades Union leaders, the backbone of the Co-operative movement and the first 'working-men' M.P.s.

Sadly James Green was not one of those who escaped. Despite his obvious intelligence and his artistic flair he never got out of the pit but he did hold the important position of Society Steward at the chapel for over forty years, starting from 1910 when he was only twenty-eight. The Society Steward was responsible for the smooth running of the organisation and the representative of the Society at the next level of administration, the Circuit. He also, albeit reluctantly, became a local preacher. The preaching function was highly esteemed in Methodism and in the early days of the Primitive Connexion had been the main means of evangelising those outside the movement. Individuals who had experienced 'conversion' were encouraged to share this experience with others and to exhort them to live their lives according to the scriptures. By the end of the nineteenth century the process had become much more institutionalised, with candidates only admitted to 'the Plan', the authorised pool of preachers officially engaged to conduct services at a given place at a given date, after giving proof of serious biblical study and the ability to construct and deliver a coherent sermon to the satisfaction of adjudicators.

James' account of his own reluctance throws an interesting light on both the organisation and the man himself:

> I was nominated by the leaders' meeting at Billy Row as a candidate for the preachers' plan in 1900. [*He was only eighteen at the time*]. But somehow I did not seem to have the urge to proceed. I was not 'called'. I tried to do my stuff by reading lessons and giving out hymns for my father. He was very proud of me doing this and gave me every encouragement to carry on with exams etc. but ... I finally made up my mind that my job in the Church was not that of preaching ... I carried on with my work as a Sunday School teacher and Society Steward and ... it was about this time that I began to make posters for the Church's special events - a work I thoroughly enjoyed.[18] I was interested in the Christian Endeavour movement. We had established a weekly meeting in the old chapel and it was at the inception of the C.E. society that I along with others signed the C.E. pledge to be an ACTIVE MEMBER. I am thankful to say that whatever else I may have failed in ... I have remained ACTIVE.

As a result of his Christian Endeavour contributions James in 1918 came to the notice of a newly appointed minister, the Reverend E.B. Storr, who was something of a controversial figure with pronounced pacifist and left-wing views. Storr pressed him once again to take up preaching and this time, still reluctantly, he agreed. He was accepted on to the full Plan in 1920. By then he was thirty-eight years old. He was never satisfied with his performance in the pulpit. As he says, he never felt he had preached a 'real' sermon. 'I have tried to talk sensibly on a text from the scriptures ... but I was not cut

out for a "special preacher"'.[19] In fact for some of us his 'sensible' scriptural exposition was a welcome relief from the more exhortatory style of many of the other preachers. He would have made an excellent teacher.

Writing at a later date when the church was under threat of closure James gives some impression of the amount of activity that took place within it. On a Monday night there was a Class meeting, at which 'those who felt inclined to speak of their religious experience were encouraged to do so ... If no person struck up a hymn the leader would do so. At the close or near the close ... the leader would sum up all that had been said. The meeting closed with a suitable hymn'. At its most prosperous there could be twenty people at the Monday Class meeting. On Tuesday there was the Christian Endeavour meeting, designed to appeal primarily to young people but attended by some of the older ones as well. Wednesday saw the choir practice led by the redoubtable John Scriven. John Scriven's sister Beatrice became the church organist and together they ran the musical activities there for over thirty years. They were still active when I joined the choir in the mid 1940s. By the 1930s Beatrice and James Green were in-laws, both having married members of the Dixon family. The choir gave concerts in other churches, sang at every Sunday evening service, and annually celebrated its 'anniversary' with a musical production of one sort or another. There were also women's group meetings and a strong involvement in overseas missions.

James alludes to other families who provided the backbone of the membership of the new church, among them Nattrass, Hughes, Portrey, Hall, Lines, Stevens, Fairless and, later, Wilsher, Layburn and Allanson, and there were others who came and went according to the vagaries of their job situations.

Although the turnover of the generations had ensured a supply of young adults to the Billy Row Centenary Chapel despite the losses in the First World War, and James considers this one of the church's most lively periods, the early twenties were not an easy time economically in the South Durham coalfield. The slump in demand for coal following the end of the war and the removal of government controls on the industry brought strikes and short-time working, culminating in the confrontation that led to the General Strike of 1926. Both before and after the strike Pease and Partners were rationalising their operations by closing down non-economic pits. Competition for jobs available at those pits remaining open enabled them to lower wages and enforce short-time working. Bankfoot cokeworks and its feeder collieries remained productive but the miners themselves knew that the coal reserves were dwindling and that the long-term future was bleak. After 1926 some of those with young families and transferable skills began to move out. For the first time since the census had been kept there was a fall in population in the Crook area in 1931.

This fall was eventually reflected in church membership and church finance. It was not only a matter of declining membership through removal; it was also that the customary supplementary income from other sources such as the door-to-door collections accompanying the parade through the streets on Sunday School anniversary days, the contribution of fruit, vegetables and groceries to be auctioned after the Harvest Festival and returns on bazaars and church fetes were also reduced because so many were literally 'on the breadline'.

The early thirties brought another potential threat to the Society. Billy Row throughout the preceding period had supported two Methodist chapels, one on either side of the village green, the Wesleyan on the north side and the Centenary Primitive Methodist on the south. Although relations between the two societies were generally good and there was some degree of practical mutual aid the two congregations were completely distinct and there was an unspoken sense of social division between them. Nationally Wesleyanism had achieved establishment recognition by the middle of the nineteenth century at a time when the Primitive Methodist Connexion was still engaged in missionising the labouring poor. In the South Durham coalfield the incorporation and socialisation of the incoming workers in the 1870s and 80s had been largely, though not entirely, the work of the Primitives, who jealously guarded their working-class credentials and their radical politics.

But in the post first-world-war years there had been a growing recognition at national level of the need to combine forces in the face of declining congregations and the increasing secularisation of the cultural pursuits of the young. So on 20 September 1932, in a massive demonstration of solidarity at the Albert Hall, Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodists [20] joined to form one church. The representatives of the three churches all voted separately and unanimously for the union and the service was broadcast throughout the country on the radio. October 7th was set aside as celebration sunday in the Crook circuit, with an interchange of preachers and joint communion services. James was unwell and could not attend so we do not have his account of the events.

In some parts of the country Methodist union was accompanied by the merging of congregations and the closure of churches but not in Billy Row, where the congregations were deemed sufficient to maintain both and, as James remarked later, 'if it had been necessary to close one it wouldn't have been Centenary'. So in practice, apart from the production of a combined list of local preachers and the sharing of the ministers, very little changed. The two congregations remained separate but mutually supportive as they had been before. There was the occasional joint undertaking but no amalgamation.

The early thirties were lean years for the South Durham coalfield generally. Some protection in Crook and Billy Row came from the presence of Bankfoot cokeworks, whose diversified by-products remained marketable and helped maintain employment in the feeder collieries. The national concern about levels of unemployment which spawned the Special Areas Act of 1934 brought little new industry to Crook, but the slum-clearance order, which resulted in the demolition of the Roddymoor Rows in the later thirties and the building of new estates, improved the quality of life for many local families, as well as providing some extra work in the construction industry. James Green's was one of the families rehoused and, although he expresses some regret at the break up of the old community, it is clear that he soon accommodated himself to the modern amenities. There was also an assisted removals scheme for those who wanted to move elsewhere in search of work. The precise effect of these measures on the membership of the Centenary Methodist Chapel is difficult to assess. Certainly in the 1940s when I arrived there there seemed to have been some recent removals out of the district by young families whose parents were still members.

But by then the gradual build up of rearmament followed by the outbreak of the Second World War had revived the flagging economy of the coalfield. James Green's diaries record him listening with horrified fascination to the radio news bulletins in the months leading up to the war, for, like his father before him and many other Methodists, his instincts were pacifist. However, the demands of the aircraft industry for Bankfoot coke, which was highly prized in aluminium smelting, returned the works to all-out production and revived the profitability of the local coal seams. Coal and coke production were reserved occupations, so far fewer men were called up in this district than in some other parts of the country. As far as the chapel was concerned most of the leaders came either from James Green's generation or from those coming in as adults in the 1920s. So, even if not in reserved occupations, most were above the call-up age. When my family came to Billy Row in 1942 it was to a thriving community relatively lightly touched by the more traumatic aspects of the war.

I came from a background which overlapped in some measure with that of some of the children whom I encountered at Billy Row Council School and Billy Row Centenary Sunday School. My maternal grandparents were committed Primitive Methodists living in a small South Yorkshire mining town not unlike Crook and I had spent a seminal year with them when I started school and my father was in the process of redeployment at the beginning of the war. My parents never became members of Billy Row Centenary Methodist Church. I think they had both sat through a few sermons too many in their youth. But my mother would always turn out for Harvest Festivals, Sunday School Anniversaries and other special services, as well as for all the concerts and other activities put on by the church. My father maintained a friendly distance, helping out in practical ways such as finding someone to mend the boiler or supplying bits and pieces for James to use in his various 'odd jobs'. Our household was permeated with Methodist values - teetotal, non-smoking, non-gambling, non-swearing, thrifty, frugal and hard working - and when as a widower my grandfather came to live with us he immediately joined the Chapel and remained a member until his death.

I needed the socialisation provided by Billy Row Centenary Chapel for we were not only incomers but something of a social anomaly. Through a bizarre set of circumstances partly related to the demands of the 'war effort' my father, who in 1938 had been no more than a colliery chemist with some experience of coke-making procedures, found himself in 1942 running Bankfoot cokeworks. He was the first man in that situation not to have come out of the colliery and coal-processing élite and I am not sure that anybody quite knew what to make of us. Managers' kids were not expected to go to the council school and attend the Primitive Methodist Sunday School, but that after all was the milieu from which my parents had come.

In many ways, however, I was not unlike my peers, most of whom were sent to Sunday School regardless of whether their parents were church members or attenders. It was something to keep us occupied on Sunday afternoons, it gave the parents an hour and a half of privacy and it hopefully instilled some basic Christian principles into us. Most of the mothers, like mine, would turn out on special occasions, even if the fathers, unlike mine, spent Sunday lunchtime in the pub. There was a core group of committed families that remained central to the continuity of the church. The aim was always to build up from the Sunday School to draw in a new generation of such members.

By the time the Second World War ended I had passed my 'scholarship' and was heading for the local grammar school. The children of my generation were the beneficiaries of the 1944 Butler Education Act and many of us were in time to go on to university, teacher-training college, technical education and engineering apprenticeships, all of them taking us away from the community. Among the boys even those who did not go beyond the minimum school-leaving age found their horizons widened by national service, so that the likelihood of their staying in the immediate area was considerably diminished.

Yet the imminence of change was masked in the two or three years following the end of the war by the continuance of wartime shortages and restrictions and the lack of competition from war-damaged continental industry. The nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947 was welcomed as a release from the domination of the coalowners, but in the longer term it gave scope for rationalisation on a national rather than a company scale, and the local collieries had been nearing the end of their viable economic life even before wartime demands had depleted their reserves still further.

For us as cheerful uncaring adolescents there was chapel, there was an enterprising Methodist-run youth club and three cinemas in Crook, and, for those whose parents were not so strict, a local dance hall which provided tuition in ballroom and old-time dancing in the early evenings once a week, as well as tennis and other sports at the local miners welfare. It did not feel like a declining community.

Yet so far as the chapel was concerned there were changes that even we noticed. Beattie Dixon, née Scriven, the organist and sometimes choirmistress, died suddenly in December 1945. There was no one of comparable expertise to succeed her and, although there was an official appointment made at the annual trustees' meeting in January 1946, in the longer term some unedifying squabbles ensued. Episodes like this were not unprecedented, although for much of its existence Billy Row Centenary seems to have been relatively free from warring factions. We were dimly aware that something was amiss, but any misgivings were offset by two successful choir and Sunday School productions performed in the early spring of 1946 and the launching of a fund to buy a new pipe organ for the church. James Green's diary for 1946 reveals that he was doubtful from the first about the wisdom of such expenditure in the light of falling membership but in the short term the effort put into fund raising had a salutary effect on morale. Infuriatingly James did not preserve his diaries of the next two years. On his retirement in September 1948 he seems to have made a selection from what he had written and destroyed the rest. So he only records retrospectively the installation of the new organ, and the redecoration of the church that accompanied it, and notes the grand opening on 6 November 1948 in two sentences. I was there and the church, probably for the last time, was packed.

The availability of the new organ reopened the dispute about who was to play it. On Saturday 6 March 1949 James wrote sadly, 'Our society is at a very low ebb at present and I am sorry to say that I cannot see any hope for the future. We have no choir now ... In acquiring a pipe organ we have lost things far more valuable than a "kist of whistles" '.[21] And even the new organ was not working properly; in April the makers, Nelsons, had to be called in to replace the motor. At the same time it was

decided to hold joint morning services with the Wesleyan congregation across the Green because morning attendance was low at both churches. I have to confess that I had abandoned Sunday morning services because I often stayed with a school friend to go dancing in Weardale on a Saturday night and there were no buses back until lunchtime on Sundays. In October the same year, following the removal from the area of one of the families that had been involved in the church from the outset, there was serious talk of amalgamation and holding alternate services in the two buildings but this was rejected. In the summer of the following year the heating boiler, which had been defective for some time, had to replaced.

Death and job changes continued to erode membership. At some date in 1950 I became Sunday School secretary, a not particularly onerous task but a means of ensuring my continued participation. I was already a Sunday School teacher for the youngest children and had been approached along with others in my age group about 'leading' evening services. I even got as far as doing some 'supply' preaching. In retrospect the Sunday School at this date was still well attended but attendance at the evening service fluctuated depending on the weather and who was in the pulpit. With the ending of wartime restrictions and the opportunity to use paid holidays younger folk were not inclined to stay at home on sunny summer Sundays and the holiday season emptied both church and Sunday School.

In September 1952 my father left the cokeworks to take up an administrative post in Newcastle and we had to vacate the house in Billy Row for the incoming manager. The following month I started my degree course at London University and so my connection with Billy Row Centenary was broken. I was not really aware at that time how much the church had declined. In fact that summer my concern was mainly about my A-level results but I was also worried about our impending removal and about the plight of the Green family. In July James' wife, at seventy-nine almost ten years his senior, had to have a leg amputated and later that summer he himself developed heart trouble which was subsequently diagnosed as angina.

The limitation of his physical activity and the necessary additional commitment to looking after his wife were a further blow to the church. For, although he does not admit it in either his diary or his narrative account, he had been its mainstay, using his abilities as a handyman to fix most of the things that went wrong with the fabric and his diplomatic skills to soothe ruffled tempers, as well as fulfilling a number of official functions. His account of the closing stages of the church's existence which I was not there to experience makes sad reading.

Already in 1954 he noted that the issue of redundancy had been high on the agenda of that year's Methodist Conference and he added, 'I am sorry to say that we have now got to a point at Centenary church where we are so reduced in numbers that we have had more than one meeting discussing the closing of the building for public worship'. Part of the problem lay in the progressive reduction of employment in the coal industry in the area. The new industries, machine-tool making, a clothing factory and a paintworks using Bankfoot by-products, for the most part provided jobs for people living in Crook itself, not in Billy Row or Roddymoor. But James put his finger on what was probably a more important factor when he contrasted public attitudes at the time the

church was built with those of the mid 1950s. In the earlier period, he said, 'People ... enjoyed religion and religious meetings'. It was a cultural change as much as an economic one.

In the spring of 1955 Elizabeth Green, now approaching her eighty-second birthday, had her remaining leg amputated. In a period before stairlifts she was now confined to the bedroom and most of the time to her bed. James' sister and helpful neighbours enabled him to continue some of his functions in the church but in 1956 what he calls 'the Replanning Commission of the Methodist Church in the District' scheduled it for closure. There were virtually no scholars in the Sunday School and Sunday evening congregations had dwindled to a mere dozen. The four trustees 'on the ground' (there is no surviving diary for this date to say who these four were but he was manifestly one of them) 'decided to advise the closing of the church'. James arranged a meeting with the incoming minister and, as he writes, 'On 6 September seven trustees being present we decided to close on 30 September - the Harvest Festival'. What makes his account even more poignant is that this decision coincided with a marked deterioration in his wife's condition. She died three days after the closure.

The early months of 1957 were spent in disposing of the church furnishings. Most of the Sunday School things went to the church across the Green that James and his sister now attended. The organ was sold to the Central Methodist Church, Hebburn, as was the pulpit. The pews proved difficult to dispose of for they were custom built and curved to fit the church. Eventually they went to Chilton church.

The building itself still stands. It passed almost immediately into commercial use. Reading the diaries and journals that, along with personal recollection, have formed the basis of this article evoked for me a whole way of life which, with a shock, I realise is passing from living memory. So I should be grateful to hear from anyone else who, reading it, can add to the information about the church that I have put together. For such information is the 'stuff' of local history.

NOTES

1. H.B. Kendall, *The Origin and History of the Primitive Methodist Church*, vol.ii (n.d. [c.1905]), p.134.

2. E. Lloyd, *History of Crook and Neighbourhood Co-Operative, Corn Mill and Provision Society* (1919), pp.40, 50-51 and 56.

3. They provided a Miners' Institute, subscribed towards and laid the foundation stones of several chapels, and, as Henry Green records, also provided a horse and cart and stall in the market place for a resident Temperance missionary to distribute improving literature. However, despite Peases and Partners' ownership of the main local sources of employment, there were at this date too many other collieries around about, owned by other companies, for Crook to become a 'Pease' town.

4. The ones used for this article are: Kendall (see note 1); J. Petty, *The History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion from its origin to the Conference of 1860* (1864), which is very useful for organisational details in the early period; J. Ritson, *The Romance of Primitive Methodism* (1909), a book much loved by North country Primitive Methodists. Ritson was an Allendale man and a friend of Henry Green; and B.A. Barber, *A Methodist Pageant* (1932), which is largely based on the works already listed but brings the story up to the moment of union in 1932.

5. F. Whellan, *History, Topography and Directory of the County Palatine of Durham* (1894), p.265. Durham County Record Office: Crook tithe plan, and Ordnance Survey for land usage.

6. See references in Henry Green's 'Memories' and W. Stokes, 'Weardale: the Last Undiscovered Dale', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, vol.13, no.2 (1993), pp.36-43.

7. The census entries show that this took place between 1871 and 1881, which was a period of maximum demand for coke in the Middlesbrough iron industry.

8. According to his son he had lived in twenty-two houses in the previous nineteen years.

9. George Race was the architect son of the Weardale evangelist and himself a Primitive Methodist local preacher. He had started out as a joiner and one of the outstanding features of the church was the quality of its interior woodwork.

10. This could not have been helped by the fact that the Billy Row Inn was directly opposite the building site, on the other side of the village green.

11. There is no more information about the arrival of the Wesleyans in Billy Row than there is about the Primitives. Billy Row is mentioned as being on the Wesleyan 'Plan' in 1871 in Lloyd, *op. cit.* p.49. The Temperance Hall may have been another Pease provision. It is still standing, a barn-like structure about one hundred yards from the Primitive Methodist chapel and twenty-five yards from the Wesleyan.

12. Henry J. Mein was something of a local notable in Primitive Methodist circles. He was a colliery manager who had acquired extensive holdings in coal companies, both locally and in Nottinghamshire. James recalls him running the Sunday School at Howden-le-Wear in the 1880s, but by 1908 he was living at Toft Hill Hall in considerable splendour.

13. Of the worthies mentioned here, John Williamson was a close friend of Henry Green and figures in his 'Memories', Hodgson is also noted as a prosperous butcher in Crook, but there is no information about the other two.

14. The Scrivens had been active Primitive Methodists at Bowden Close, another colliery village in the Crook circuit, before moving to Crook. John Scriven even in old age was a lively and occasionally acerbic character, who drilled his choir with considerable rigour.

15. He names them as his father and himself, W.P. and R. Jackson, who seem to have been another father and son, John W. Ainsley, Joseph Nattrass, Hugh Williamson and William Gilliland. It was a matter of pride for one Society to have so many active preachers, although it could deplete the congregation when they were all 'planned away' on the same Sunday. Of those named John W. Ainsley and Joseph Nattrass were then young men who were still active preachers twenty years later, when my family lived in Billy Row.

16. See Barber, *op. cit.*, p.149.

17. The Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour, to give it its correct title, was founded by an American Congregationalist, F.E. Clark, in 1881. It was taken up by Primitive Methodism and other nonconformist denominations as a means of bridging the gap between the Sunday School and adult membership. In addition to devotional meetings it also encouraged the study of current affairs and increasingly took on some of the characteristics of a Youth Club movement.

18. James was a talented self-taught calligrapher, whose posters graced most of the notice boards of Crook chapels at one time or another and who developed a remunerative sideline in lettering boards for the collieries and cokeworks when required. Most of us had Sunday School prizes elegantly inscribed by him, and he records in his diary that he once executed a commission for a presentation at the local Catholic church, a shattering experience for a Primitive Methodist. My father, who had lettered chapel notice boards in South Yorkshire before moving north, discussed with him the relative merits of Gothic and Italic but James' style was his own.

19. I think that what he means by 'special' is missionising. The underlying aim of all preaching was to draw the listeners into the 'fold'. Even though threats of 'hell fire' had gone out of fashion, a 'good' preacher was supposed to stir the emotions, to stimulate his or her hearers to greater commitment, and this he could not do.

20. The United Methodists were themselves the result of the amalgamation in 1907 of the United Methodist Free Churches, the Methodist New Connexion and the Bible Christians. The diversity of varieties of Methodism was often as much related to regional as to theological differences. See references in G. Milburn and M. Batty (eds.), *Workaday Preachers* (1995).

21. 'Kist of whistles' is a Scottish name for an organ. James' use of it may be taken from Burns. Like many Primitive Methodists he was a gret admirer of Burns, Ruskin and Dickens.

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