

Chapter 20

RELIGION

Bingley Hall's first involvement with religion was on the occasion of a visit by Moody and Sankey, well known for the hymn book, popular in chapels, that bears their joint names. During the winter of 1874 these American evangelists held a series of revivalist meetings in England, mainly in the north. In February 1875 it was Birmingham's turn. The popularity of the occasion was well portrayed in *Illustrated London News* by a large picture showing a crowded Bingley Hall. (15)

In the footsteps of the two Americans came evangelists Torrey and Alexander, who campaigned at the hall in January 1904. (18)

Much later in the century, in June and July 1960, the hall was the venue for Eric Hutchings and his month-long Greater Birmingham & Midlands Crusade. (19) Coach parties from all over the Midlands conveyed eager passengers to King Alfred's Place, providing excellent audiences for the evangelist, as the *Christian Herald* reported.

The one thousand strong choir . . . under the composer pianist Mr Robert Harkman . . . 6,000 people packed Bingley Hall last Saturday night, for the opening meeting . . . the temperature was well into the 80s . . . the hottest Whit-Sunday the city has known since the war. (20)

There was a special songbook on sale – at 3s 6d, quite expensive – to enable the large congregation to add their voices to those of the choir. (21) Such was the enthusiasm for the event, many attending more than once, some many times more than once, that the organisers decided to continue the crusade for an additional week. In a report in the *Birmingham Post* it was estimated that some 150,000 people attended these meetings. (22)

In 1893 Birmingham hosted an important event in the Church of England calendar, the Annual Congress. Special trains were provided by the London & North Western Railway. Associated activities took place in the Town Hall, the Midland Institute and in churches throughout the area. But the principal venue, described in the official programme as their Congress Hall, was Bingley Hall. (23)

The proceedings were opened in the hall on Tuesday 3 October by the Bishop of Worcester, but the main speaker was none other than the head of the Church, the “*Most Reverend the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury*”. Hymn singing in the hall was almost as impressive as in the finest of churches because a grand organ had been installed specially for the Congress.

The Organ to be used in the Congress Hall will be erected by Messrs J Halmshaw & Sons of Birmingham, and will consist of 3 manuals, 28 stops and 1106 pipes. It will have two pneumatic pistons to the Grand Organ and Swell Stops, one the pedal acting on the Grand to Pedal Complex and one Tremulant Pedal to Swell. (24)

The first evening was devoted to a “*Working Men’s Meeting*”. Admission for evening events usually cost a shilling, an expensive outing for a working man, who would have been very lucky, at that date, to have a been paid even twenty of those coins for a working week of six long days. However, free tickets had been distributed throughout the city by the clergy and employers, the recipients being hand-picked. The agenda for this working-class audience sounds somewhat patronising and certainly not very exciting.

THE WORK OF THE CHURCH AMONG THE ARTISAN POPULATION

Congress visitors, many of them middle-class clerics, were offered recreation in the city during their leisure time by various gentlemen’s clubs, where, of course, the aforementioned prejudice of the lower orders would not be encountered.

The following Clubs will admit Gentlemen Members of the Congress as Honorary Members during the week of the Congress: Union Club, Clef Club, Conservative Club, Liberal Club, Arts Club, Liberal Unionist Club, Midland Conservative Club, and the Midland Club (Masonic). (26)

If there were any women visitors to the Congress they were certainly not mentioned in any context. One thing is certain: none of those clubs would have admitted them even if there had been any.

The event was rated as a great success by the organisers. In the official report of the next Church Congress held in Birmingham, that of 1921, a reference to the earlier one claimed that, in 1893, "*mass meetings in Bingley Hall were a remarkable feature.*" (27)

In 1921 the religious and business meetings were held in the Town Hall and the Wesleyan Central Hall. Bingley Hall was reserved for their "*Ecclesiastical Art Exhibition Loan Collection*". This extraordinary collection consisted of more than 800 items. The list in the illustrated guide covers sixty pages and ranges from a "*bassoon used in church until 1857*" to a fourteenth-century coffin paten, "*the oldest known piece of church silver in the diocese of Lichfield*". Many of the items were of considerable archaeological interest, the most ancient being two Babylonian tablets from c2500 BC. Birmingham Municipal Art Gallery lent an "*altar frontal, needlework from Palermo, late 16th century*" and the local Archaeological Society contributed "*five pictures of St Martin's before renovation in 1872*". (28) There was also a "*large display by the leading church furnishers, stained glass artists and stone carvers, missionary and other societies*". Music by Mr Kendal-Grimston's Orchestra provided solace to the jaded and the footsore.

Birmingham was not entirely overlooked by the Church of England between 1893 and 1921. In June 1910 the Church Missionary Society organised an exhibition in the city, partly in Bingley Hall and partly next door in the Prince of Wales Theatre. Entitled "*Africa and the East*", it

lasted for three weeks. The official guide, which ran to 88 pages – there was a lot to describe – named the president of the show as “*The Lord Bishop of Birmingham, the Right Reverend Charles Gore, DD*”. The aims of the exhibition were threefold.

Our aim is therefore to catch the attention of the casual observer and cause him to think . . . Have those living in heathen lands an equal right with me to know the Gospel message of God’s love . . . and its civilising power? . . . the second great aim [is] . . . to show them [the casual observers] . . . there is a corner where their talents . . . may be profitably directed to this great work . . . But there is a third aim . . . the consecration of money, self and life. (29)

Realistic tableaux were set up depicting many aspects of life in far-flung corners of the globe. An African village featured a weaving hut and displays of other industries, also idols, slave whips and manacles. (Was it pointed out, one wonders, that the manacles were probably made in Birmingham?)

The Canadian Eskimo section displayed dog sledges, canoes, harpoons and a snow hut, whilst there was a tepee and a medicine man from those tribes much further south on the American continent. A Shinto temple and an artist at work were featured in a Japanese village. But the Chinese street was a little more sinister. An addition to the village inn and a chemist’s shop,

there was an opium den. (Opium, which had become the curse of China, had been forced upon them by British gun-boats in the nineteenth century.) It was a very religious street, however, with both a pagoda and a Buddhist temple.

The Indian village had its bazaar, a temple and a wayside shrine, with houses showing the women's sequestered quarters. A Persian caravanserai and a Bedouin tent characterised "*the Mohammedan Lands*".

There were articles for sale crafted in all of those countries and, during the evening, their national melodies were sung from the music platform. The British & Foreign Bible Society exhibited their translations of the Bible in many languages. Possibly the most praiseworthy activity of these missionaries, their medical work, had its own large section.

Two decades later, in 1931, missionaries returned to Bingley Hall and organised another similar exhibition, but covering extra peoples and countries, Australia, Egypt, Burma, New Guinea, Palestine, and South America. (30)

Earlier in the century, in 1908, religion and missionaries had come to the hall in a quite unusual way. An exhibition advertised as "*Palestine in Birmingham*" was staged there by the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst Jews. The official guide and programme gives a strong impression that the sponsors were addressing themselves principally to convinced Christians:

In these days when so much doubt is cast upon the Word of God . . . it is a cause of

great thankfulness that in the land of Palestine, we have the best solution to many difficulties . . . the models and exhibits [at the exhibition] illustrate Eastern life . . . When at last the exhibition closes its doors . . . you will remember that God's Word is a Jewish Book, that you believe in a Jewish Saviour and the result will be a practical interest in Jewish missions. (31)

The missionaries were despatched all over Europe, the programme stated, with the object of converting Jews. Asking, in the guide, “*what does it cost to convert a Jew?*”, the society claimed that during the hundred years of its existence, “*600 Jews have been baptised in Jerusalem alone*” and “*nearly 300 have become clergymen of the Church of England*”. That is less than ten Jews per year! (32)

Presumably the society felt sufficiently encouraged by their exhibition's reception in 1908 that they considered it worthwhile returning in 1921. This time the exhibition was opened by the Lord Bishop of Birmingham, an endorsement of considerable importance. In addition to displays illustrating life in Palestine, lectures and Bible classes were arranged each day. No claims were made about baptisms amongst Birmingham's Jews, so presumably there was no success on this occasion either. Perhaps a splash in the Rea seemed less attractive than total immersion in the Jordan! But it is much more likely that Jews who visited these exhibitions – if any – simply preferred to remain Jewish. (33)

In June 1906 the hall was hired by the Wesleyans in order to stage a “*Grand Scenic Bazaar*”. The Birmingham Central Mission, recently installed in the New Central Hall, Corporation Street, needed money to carry out their programme of charitable and religious work. The object of the bazaar, the official handbook informs us, was to raise £10,000.

On entering the building from King Alfred's Place, the visitor finds himself in the Main Hall of the building, around which have been erected a quadrangle of stalls representing King Edward's Dominions from East to West. With one sweep of the eye he can view the architectural characteristics of Great Britain and Ireland; her Colonies and Dependencies; Gorgeous East and Practical West; Sunny South and Vigorous North; Lands of Rajahs and Land of Roses. Old Civilisations and New and Progressive Nations, all meet in the one room under the one emblem. Four handsome Kiosks in the middle of the square add to the attractiveness of the appearance and a delicious sense of freshness and coolness is imparted by the presence of the Fairy Fountain. Object of the Bazaar: To raise a sum of £10,000 For the funds of . . . The New Central Hall, opened in September 1904, was erected to provide . . . an Assembly Hall for the Services, and School Club and Classrooms for the religious, social and philanthropic

work of the Birmingham Central Mission, of which the Rev F L Wiseman is the Superintendent . . . and adequate accommodation for the Great District Gatherings, the Synods, and the Committee Meetings of the Birmingham and Shrewsbury District of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. (34)

The stalls were organised and manned by volunteers from Midland Wesleyan Districts and Circuits, coming from as far afield as Stourbridge, Rugby and Nuneaton. Amongst a variety of attractions visitors could choose to enjoy a shooting gallery, a fine-art gallery and an entertainment hall. The mainstay of the latter was a comedian who presented a daily routine with a quite unpronounceable – and almost unspellable – nineteen-letter title.

Mr H S Richards will give Selections from his Original, Historical, Farcical, Operatical, Side Splitical, Extravaganzical, Mechanical, Epidemical, Whimsical, Vocal and Musical Entertainment entitled, Keropoieticautomata.

It would be remiss, in this glance at the Wesleyan bazaar, not to reproduce a cleverly constructed “*prognostic acrostic*” that was featured in the catalogue, the work of Mr Richards.

1. *G*reat are the attractions, both diversified and numerous
2. *R*echerche scientific shows, and entertainments

- humorous;*
3. *E ach evening will be on view the marvellous "Telautograph,"*
 4. *A cross between a telegraph, a telephone, and photograph.*
 5. *T hen we shall simply revel in the wonders hydrostatical.*
 6. *D isplayed in lavish beauty by "The Fairy Fount" prismatical;*
 7. *I "Hall of Laughter" join we in the merriment vociferous;*
 8. *S melling Competitions" we enjoy - though odoriferous.*
 9. *T urn we to "The Magic Well" with promise problematical;*
 10. *R uth; or, Fairleigh Mystified"-a trifle operatical*
 11. *I nvites with motormetrical and lyrically humorous*
 12. *C oncerted pieces, songs, duets, and complications numerous.*
 13. *T he costume of the Honourable Algernon is - "Bloomerous".*
 14. *Both "Talking Head" and "Fishing Pond" attract in close proximity.*
 15. *A nd certain cries of "Try your weight" affect our equanimity.*
 16. *Z oology appeals to us in doses microscopical,*
 17. *A nd entertainments known as "Keropieticautomatical"*
 18. *A bounding in most awful puns, and statements metaphorical,*
 19. *R eferring to most celebrated characters historical.*
 20. *B e sure to see "The Conjurer" mysterious and magical,*
 21. *I nspect "The Works of Art" on subjects comical and tragical,*
 22. *N or fail to pay a visit to "The Cafe-Chantant" glorious;*
 23. *G o in for "Competitions" and may you be victorious.*
 24. *L ectures Scientific will attract the intellectual,*

25. *E xtravaganzas Humorous" will not prove ineffectual*
26. *Y et "Epicycloid Instruments" I prithee, Sir, inspect you well.*
27. *H ow elegant the articles, best known as multifarious*
28. *A rranged upon "The Stalls" for sale - no balloting precarious!*
29. *Labyrinth of crochet'd things, and crewels worked like tabinets,*
30. *L aces - point and Honiton - and richly inlaid cabinets.*
31. *B assinettes, and fenderettes, and bric-a-brac and bicycles,*
32. *I ron cots and poker work, thermometers, and tricycles,*
33. *R ings, watches, brooches, bracelets too, with ornamental jewel work,*
34. *M agnificent electro-plate, most captivating crewel-work,*
35. *I n new and elegant designs, to please the most fastidious.*
36. *N etted mats, embroidery, and lucky-bags insidious.*
37. *G rand and glorious harmony, with sweetest sounds symphonious,*
38. *H ere may be heard each evening in overtures euphonious*
39. *A ttractions so diversified, and also intellectual*
40. *M ost certainly in scoring a success will prove effectual. (35)*

Methinks that even WS Gilbert himself would have applauded this skilful piece of tomfoolery! Did perhaps the author of the "GREAT DISTRICT BAZAAR BINGLEY HALL BIRMINGHAM" acrostic actually sing his paraphrase of the "Pirates of Penzance" lyrics to Sullivan's music during the entertainment sessions? "Table d'Hote luncheon" could be enjoyed for two shillings, very expensive for ordinary folk. Would-be diners were tempted by

the announcement that “*the Luncheon hour will be beguiled by the music of the Handsworth Wood Amateur Orchestra*. Some of the Wesleyans’ charitable work is described in the handbook.

Part of our policy at the Bethnal Mission is to do all we can for the children of our city before their characters have been permanently warped by the unwholesome atmosphere of the streets . . . the street sellers mission . . . [has sessions each week with children, who enjoy] the singing, with cups of cocoa and bread and jam afterwards.

In 1923 Birmingham was chosen as the venue for a National Catholic Congress. Religious and business activities were held in the Town Hall, St Chad’s Cathedral and other venues, but an associated event entitled “The Grand Missionary and Trades Exhibition” occupied Bingley Hall. Opened on 3 August “*by His Eminence Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster*”, it ran until 13 August, a week longer than the Congress itself.
(36)

Organised by the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, the exhibition was divided into three distinct areas. Catholic Guilds displayed art and arranged lectures, such as “Catholic Missions in the Land of the Sphinx” and “The Holy Ghost Fathers in West Africa”. The most spectacular section was the one organised by missionary societies. Inevitably, due to the identical nature of missionary activities, their displays were

somewhat similar to those listed in the Church of England's 1910 exhibition, described earlier. There was an African village, an Indian bazaar, a Chinese street, scenes from South America and Palestine, also an "Esquimaux Court", whatever that was. Associated film shows included such titles as "A Missionary in Southern India" and "Lourdes".

The exhibition was a distinct success but the Congress itself seems to have been something of a disappointment. An article in a contemporary Catholic magazine ponders the reasons.

The gathering . . . must be pronounced to have been a success . . . but Catholic lay-folk . . . have not yet, it would seem, realized the importance of such occasions . . . [There was not] a great influx of visitors . . . the special train from London on August 3rd had more than one empty coach, and there were plenty of seats left vacant in the not over-large Town Hall at the inaugural meeting that evening . . . Coinciding with the Congress . . . there was held in Birmingham a great Catholic Missionary Exhibition . . . eclipsing in extent and importance the recent Westminster display . . . There can be no doubt that the Congress helped the Exhibition . . . whether the Exhibition helped the Congress is somewhat more doubtful. The more attractive it was, the more distracting it naturally proved. (37)

Bingley Hall was the venue for another Catholic Exhibition in July 1949. (38)