

Laying the Foundation.

Being the Story of the
Commencement of



Aylestone Park Primitive Methodist Church.
(LEICESTER II. CIRCUIT.)

By Susanna Scott.

PRICE THREEPENCE.

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Recommended by Mrs. Scott. It would have been better if the author had written more of the kind of paper - some of them were brought in.

The text below is taken from the document pictured, which was written around 1898:

In the year 1875, the latter part of May, I left Wisbech, Cambs., and came to business in Leicester. Soon after, the conference camp meeting was held on the Old Racecourse, now known as The Victoria Park.

My first effort on Sunday was to enquire for a Primitive Methodist Chapel; soon I found myself in a Unitarian Building. On finding my mistake I withdrew, to continue my search, and was directed to St Nicholas Street, second circuit. On ascending the steps I turned to the right hand, quietly pushed the door open, and entered the first pew under the gallery, as the service was going on. At the close I silently withdrew unobserved and an unknown stranger.

I had not taken my seventeenth birthday, but had been a member for some years. I continued to attend for some weeks twice on Sundays, finishing up at the open-air service held in Humberstone Gate in the evening, leaving at once at the conclusion; no one spoke to me.

One morning the silence was broken; a gentleman caught me at the door before I made my exit. "Excuse me, Miss," he began, "but you have been watched since you first attended this church; you attend very regularly; it is thought you are connected and belong to a Methodist family, the way you enter into the service tells." The conversation continued several minutes. In the evening an introduction was given to several friends and a seat was offered in the late Mr Watter's pew. Soon after, an invitation was given to attend Miss Astill's afternoon class, but I found I could not manage it.

Four months glided away; during that time my first visit was paid to Aylestone Park to secure apartments. The walk was very lonely. On reaching the Common no other house was to be seen till Saffron Lane was reached, then no more nearer than Batten Street. No gas works had been thought of. Green fields, high hedges; plenty of cattle strolled down to the riverside. Crow Lane, which was situated about thirty yards through the railway bridge, Aylestone side, has of late years passed out of sight as well as memory. The high hedges on each side of the old green lane hung thick with pretty wild roses and woodbine. The tragic story in connection with its bygone days has vanished with it, save in the annals of history.

On reaching Cavendish Road, a heavy gate shut it off from the high road with small gates at each end. These have also long vanished. A rather high embankment ran alongside the front entrance of the late Mr Colton's entrance - the high hill having been cut away for traffic - terminating at the carriage drive of the late Mr Lorrimer. A few villas on the opposite side, then all open country until the old village was reached with its old hall and church. Passing through the turn gate that led through to Cavendish Road to Saffron Lane, several villas stood. On the ground where stands the Chapel all was open and wild save for the houses on Richmond and Lansdown Roads.

Soon I came to reside in the locality. For sometime I walked twice on Sundays to St Nicholas Street, when the chilly days of October began and the trees became bare, and the need for a

lantern was necessary on the return journey, to keep me from falling into some hole or pool of water on dark starless nights; all has changed.

The journeys became irksome, an inclination to draw a chair near to a bright cheerful fire and forget one's self in some attractive book was a temptation not always to be resisted. The need for a place to worship in became more pressing than ever. October lengthened out to November. Various attempts had been made by myself and other members of my family, that had but recently come from a flourishing cause at Wisbech to reside here and that felt the need of a Christian home once more. Efforts were made to induce the super. the Rev Thomas Baron, to obtain help, as there were at least six or seven members to start with and others would be added.

To our surprise, late one afternoon an interview was asked by the young minister, the Rev Tolfree Parr. "Good news, Mrs. Miles," he began to my aunt, "good news, Miss Porter," he continued, "a room has been obtained for constant worship." "What a blessing!" we both exclaimed. "Is it very far?" was the next enquiry. "No, it is in your own street, close to your own front door. Mrs John Wood has agreed to lend her front parlour twice on Sundays and once in the week for public worship. You will be supplied with able men. Mr and Mrs Wykes, who are living at Mr Batten's coal-wharf and are members of our church, will be in constant attendance. I hope you will be very comfortable," he continued as he pleasantly chatted over the affair before taking his leave. November was extra cold and raw, the fog gave the evening an unusual dreary appearance, as for the first time I stepped into the cosy parlour of brother Wood's. A bright fire sent the sparks up in profusion. No one else had arrived save Mr Wood's young daughter. Everything looked peaceful and homelike. In the centre stood the table. A lamp was burning brightly, a large family Bible, and hymnbook containing the old hymns remembered in the early Methodist homes, lay waiting for use. Quietly I took a seat not far from the ruddy, glowing fire, and silently watched the door. Mr and Mrs Wykes entered, followed by Mrs Miles, Mrs Porter, Mrs Wood, Mrs Jelly, Elizabeth Orton, and others. Soon it was full, as with reverence the lay preacher asked a blessing on the assembly; soon it came with power. The old familiar tunes, without music, went with a swing that sent a thrill through each soul present; the reading and sermon, a concluding prayer, and our first service was at an end; then a pleasant good night, with a promise to be at the next service, 6 pm Sunday evening.

Services continued with equally good results, only the room became too overcrowded to be quite pleasant, yet all was in the right direction. Autumn wore away, winter services twice on Sundays and weeknights, neither were we in any way neglected.

The Rev Thomas Barron came in turn with the Rev Tolfree Parr, Elijah Jennings, Thomas Lawrence Watters and others; Mr Parker and family and Mr Woodfield, and the Orton family, made a larger membership. Soon Mr Job Hall from the Saffron Lane level crossing gate house came, bringing his afflicted wife in her invalid chair, which the dear soul so much enjoyed her face shone with pleasure, until God suddenly called her up higher.

As the winter wore away an interesting little scene occurred in the work. A girl that attended regularly asked for a Bible, as she wanted one to read at home, as the family did not possess one. It was arranged to have an after meeting the following week, when it was decided to subscribe for one that would be substantial in later years. The Rev Thomas Barron made the presentation at the weeknight service with an address. Nothing further occurred to those peaceful gatherings save the fresh faces that came and the difficulty of making more room.

A few months after the commencement Mr Turner and family, of Dunton Bassett, and no mean supporter of Methodism, as well as one of the first and most able lay preachers on Leicester second circuit, came to reside on Cavendish Road. This was well for the small cause as he took a personal interest, with the help of his wife and daughter. Mrs Abbott also came to reside on Richmond Road, and although a prominent worker in the late Abraham Lamb's cause at the

Temperance Hall - and that afterwards became the first Salvation Army in Leicester - she gave all she could to support and help the little cause.

Then Easter came with Good Friday. A pleasant tea &c., notwithstanding the heavy snow that fell all day and night without ceasing. Friends Wykes and Wood started off in good trim with large baskets. Nothing was forgotten and our first tea meeting was quite a success.

Spring deepened into summer, then came the first bazaar held at St Nicholas Street, on behalf of Aylestone Park. Mrs J Wood presided over the Park stall. Nothing further occurred until the first Sunday morning prayer meeting at 7am, held on the green where the chapel premises now stand. It was a lovely morning, quite a number assembled on the green.

Five minutes to seven when I closed my door, plenty of time to walk over to Cavendish Road, and pass through the old turn gates. The long avenue of majestic old trees swayed in the early morning breeze, while the birds trilled out their sweetest songs. Soon prayer after prayer ascended to the Father in heaven, with lively tunes that did not fail to awaken some of the tired sleepers on the opposite side of the road, who from astonishment and sheer curiosity peeped behind the blinds to see "what was up." These meetings continued until the mission room was opened on the ground. Mr E Jennings came most mornings. One of his favourite hymns was "Turn to the Lord and seek salvation," and "In the sweet bye and bye we shall meet on that beautiful shore."

A thought was pressing on my mind for some time, but I carried it secretly, save one friend - the pressing need of a school for the young life. There was no provision nearer than Aylestone village or Leicester. Gangs of boys infested the greens playing pitch and toss.

When Miss Dixey came to reside with her sister, Mrs J Wood, a friendship began between us and I remarked, "Don't you think it would be a good thing to start a Sunday School?" For some seconds she became silent, she was evidently thinking. Then she slowly answered, "Yes, Miss Porter, it is the very thing needed in this wild neglected place, and to gather the young in means to lay the solid foundation for a substantial Primitive Methodist Church in the years to come, when we have passed away. But how is it to be done?" She continued. "I am quite willing to give any help I can, but where can we begin with no shelter whatever, no schoolroom or place, to put them in." "It is a lovely summer, Miss Dixey," I replied. "Could we not place them on the green for a time, in the afternoons? We should see in a few weeks how things get on. Suppose a house-to-house visit was paid first to see how many names could be enrolled. We could commence next Sunday." So we agreed and bade each other goodnight.

Sunday afternoon soon came, lovely and warm. Imagine our surprise on our arrival, quite one hundred boys and girls had arrived, from five years old up to youths and maidens quite seventeen. To divide them after a hymn had been sung and a prayer offered was our next thing, and to get each name, and so passed the first Sunday School held on the green at Aylestone Park, under the shelter of the clear blue sky and the shining of the brilliant sunshine. Week by week rolled away much the same, fresh children came Sunday after Sunday. The heat very much increased as August drew near, and to find shade from the glare of the sun became necessary.

Mrs Abbott of Richmond Road offered the loan of her kitchen and garden two weeks. It made a very pleasant improvement, but alas, it was of but short duration; to our dismay on the third Sunday the door was closed on us, and the only remedy was to go on as before as best we could under the circumstances. One afternoon was passed in a gateway on the Cavendish Road, but being open it proved too draughty to continue the use of it.

"On taking a walk one Sunday evening alone after the service I strolled leisurely on the embankment, full of thought, when I heard steps and my name. It was Miss Dixey. "Going for a stroll?" she inquired. Can I go with you?" "Shall be glad of your company," I replied. Soon the

conversation turned to the question we both had at heart. What is to be done? we inquired of each other; it cannot go on like this much longer, there will soon be two hundred children. Shall we give it up? October will not be so long now. "Won't it be a shame!" we both exclaimed and after all summer's work. "Well," she said, "we must come to some decision. I am perplexed." "Yes," I replied, "so am I." Silently we retraced our steps under the bright shining of the silvery moon. Goodnight had been said. "Miss Dixey, can you come back just a few minutes?" "Yes, what is it." "Don't you think if we were to see Mr Barron and Mr Parr they might do something to get us a temporary structure put up before the inclement weather sets in. We could but ask. Shall we go?" "Yes, if you will, I will." "When?" I asked. "To-morrow evening, if you like, after business, 8 pm." Monday evening found me standing near the little sweet shop at the corner of the old West Bridge, waiting for Miss Dixey.

Soon we were on our way to Norfolk Street and made inquiry for the super's residence, and rang the bell. The door was opened by a lady who invited us in. We explained matters as briefly as possible and to the point. "I will explain it all," she said, "to Mr. Barron, when he returns." At the same time she watched us both closely as we rested in the dim twilight of the close little parlour, after the heat of the day. "You must not hope yourselves up," she continued, "I fear Mr. Barron has so much on hand just now, more than can be accomplished at present. Money is urgently needed in the circuit. I do not think much can be done for Aylestone Park at present, but of course I will not fail to put all before him what you have said. No doubt you will hear something soon." With a pleasant goodnight the door closed on us. "We don't seem very successful," Miss Dixey began. "No," said I, "we don't, but we have done our best and an angel cannot do more."

As we came near to West Bridge, on the opposite side a slim boyish figure in ministerial garb hurried along. "There," we both exclaimed "Can we catch him?" as we ran across the road.

"Mr Parr, may we say a few words on behalf of our Sunday School?" Soon the same story was once more repeated. Then our turn came to watch every change on his thoughtful face and await his reply. After a pause, he began. "I like the idea, your taking this matter up, there seems to be something in it, something worth thinking about at the back of it. Surely help ought to be found, and can be, if it is thought out. I will talk it over with my super, cannot say more now but will see you both soon." With one more goodnight our work so far was done. To walk to Aylestone after the day so far spent was the next thing.

No cars were at our disposal, it seemed a long walk as we left the lights of Leicester behind, yet one thought came with those familiar words: 'In the morning sow thy seed, in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that or whether both shall be alike good; cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days.'

Several days wore away: one evening a visitor called - Mr Parr was waiting to say there was good news. "Your efforts," he began, "were not in vain. I have called to say there will be a temporary wooden structure to accommodate the children and serve for divine worship, ready for use in the shortest time possible, before the inclement weather begins." As he gave this message his face glowed with pleasure. Then he hurried off to Mrs Wood's to leave a message for Miss Dixey. In a month it was deemed necessary to open the place, as the need was becoming more pressing. It was rather a long building with forms on both sides, a rostrum at the far end, and a somewhat raised platform. An instrument was lent by Mr Burden, pianoforte manufacturer, and a neat cloth ornamented the desk where lay the sacred volume. It was opened on Sunday morning with a prayer meeting at 7 o'clock. It was a sacred hour, no one present at that service would be likely to forget it. Surely it became consecrated ground. At last the day came to a close. Monday followed with tea and an old-fashioned Methodist platform meeting. Several spoke, but the two prominent ones were the Rev Thomas Barron and a distinguished Church of England Minister, who gave a somewhat lengthy and stirring address. The building was able to

seat about three hundred, and was packed to overflowing, many being turned away. Seats were placed in the lobby. Friends from all parts of the circuit came and good collections were realised throughout all the opening services.

Soon arrangements were made for the late Mr Watters to take the position of School Superintendent. Other teachers were sought after; Mr Barron's son gave his aid every Sunday morning until his illness began that finally ended his earthly career. Mrs Abbott took a class, and the aid of two young gentlemen from one of the Wesleyan churches in Leicester, given twice every Sunday for many months, was indeed faithful and untiring service. I do not remember them being absent once in the most inclement weather and deepest snow. Aylestone Park was not in the Borough then and the journeys were very unpleasant sometimes. These young men have long since passed out of memory, but their names are written in the Book of Life. When the roll is called up yonder they will be there with other early workers in this cause, whose names have faded on earth, but will bloom again in immortality. Miss Dixey and myself each took a class, making seven teachers with the super. Mornings were given up to the school. Service was held afternoon and evening. After the opening, Mr and Mrs Burley accepted the caretaker's place.

All went on about the same, until the indisposition of Mr Parr, when it was deemed necessary to secure the aid of a hired lay preacher to rest and assist him with town and country work. In the early part of April 1877, the services of Mr W G Scott, of North Elmham, and formerly of Collyhurst Street Chapel, Manchester, were obtained. Soon he paid his first visit to Aylestone Park. As time passed on I knew him better, and eventually became Mrs Scott. For a time we went to reside at North Elmham, which broke the link between me and the little cause that I often thought of. Not only had I left that behind, but my relatives who worshipped there, so I was well acquainted with the work. After a time a change came, we decided to come to Leicester and eventually took up our residence next door but one to the Chapel.

On the removal of the Rev Parr from Leicester, the leadership of the class became vacant, and Mr Scott was appointed. As time passed and the class grew in number, an assistant leader became necessary. The office was accepted by Mr Elvey. Soon Mr Robert Phillips came to reside with his sister, Mrs Elvey. He soon found plenty of work in the school, and for several years gave faithful service until the hand of death was laid on him, and he was called up higher. On the leaving of the Burley family, the caretakers were Mr and Mrs Craggs, until the family left for Australia. Another addition was the coming of the Rev Prest from Cornwall. Necessity caused him to seek early superannuation, but although consumption was making steady inroads on his life he rendered all the service possible. For a time Miss Burden gave her services at the pianoforte with occasional help from Miss Moore, music teacher, until her removal to Hinckley. Then it fell entirely into the hands of Mr Frank Barsby. After his resignation, Miss Davies presided for a number of years. The itinerancy was filled by Rev Odell and N Jefferson. On the removal of Mr Elvey another vacancy came, but the Windram family gave good services.

Then came the laying of the stones for the New Chapel on Good Friday. The following autumn saw it opened. The building was neat and substantial. Adjoining it for some years remained the old Mission Room. That served for all sorts of purposes and became a sort of Public Hall for the general locality, Temperance meetings, political, and various entertainments, &c. as well as parish business. But the end came at last and the Rev Sidney Barron saw the last remains of the dear old wooden structure cleared away and new premises fill the place. But although the opening of the school with its various classrooms brought pleasure to many, nothing can ever obliterate from the minds of the last remaining ones who took part in the early advent of its history, the pleasure of those bygone days.

Only two remain to tell the whole story of those who joined in the first evening service in the little Batten Street parlour at Mr. Wood's - so kindly lent by that gentleman and his wife. They have both passed away, and Miss Dixey as well as Mrs Wykes, Mrs Miles (who for sixty odd years

was a substantial woman in the cause of her Master has long gone up higher), Mrs Porter, Mrs Jelly, Mrs Woodfield have all crossed the Jordan. Mr Charles Wykes and myself still remain.

The work is still going on. Who shall say who owes their new birth into the Heavenly Kingdom that knelt at the Penitent Form in those times before the term had in any way gone out of date. I have seen the old Mission Room packed to overflowing. The lamps that hung suspended by long bright chains from the beams, the stove with its brilliant fire sending sparks up in profusion and casting a ruddy glow, gave a welcome, cheery aspect to the place. Many a pleasant hour was spent by old and young.

One more thought: one man of renown, who has gone out to help to convert the dark heathen of Fernando Po and to lift them up to a higher grade of humanity, to educate and lead them to the Christian faith in the merits of Christ, through His Nativity, Agony, Crucifixion, and better than all, Resurrection and Ascension, after He had paid the debt man owed by his loss in Eden (for this Man, Christ Jesus, is the way the Truth and the Life, the Chief Corner Stone) - Jabez Bell came one Sunday afternoon to preach a trial sermon with several others, under the leadership of Mr E Jennings. He was the only one that seemed to succeed. I remember thinking as I listened to him, "that young man has a life's work before him." The prophesy has been fulfilled.

Before closing this brief record, I wish to say I have tried to make the real commencement of this Primitive Methodist cause as plain as possible. Later years can easily be picked up, but the first record seems to have all but, if not quite, died away from memory. Something seemed to say it is worth reviving. Someone may see some difficult thing needs doing, but their efforts may seem futile. The Tempter may say, "Don't trouble, it is not worth your while," or he may try to pour cold water on your honest intentions. May you find encouragement from this humble record to press forward, remembering, "He that goeth forth and weepeth bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

Press forward, press forward,
The prize is in view,
A crown of bright glory is waiting for you.

Awaiting for each, while you are anxious to keep it uppermost in mind, and to make your own calling and election sure. May you never let one single opportunity escape you of doing "whatsoever your hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

Footnote: On the first (illustrated) page of Laying the Foundation is written - 'I suggested to Mrs Scott to write this to help her, as her husband was ill, and paid for it to be printed. But the project received but little support from the Cavendish Road chapel officials and people - some of those who bought them never paid for them.' H Phipps