

Newsletters - June 2003

HERE'S TO HERITAGE

'Heritage' has become big business in our world. More people visit museums and galleries in the UK than go to watch football each year, for instance.

Our heritage is not only in prestigious historic sites and stately homes, cathedrals and spectacular landscapes. There are also towns and villages with their heritage rooms and visitors' trails. I believe that our Free Church inheritance deserves to be very much more evident in the literature that is produced and on the information boards that are put up for visitors.

One English Midland village has large display boards describing their heritage at various sites around its streets. One is in the main street outside a 1970s village library. Here we are told about other educational features from the village's past: the erudite 19th century vicar who produced learned works, and the local-born Victorian educationalist who promoted a secular humanist approach to education. One result was the nearby Reading Room. All of this is given in considerable detail for the curious visitor. Yet only a few yards away is a large two-storey Methodist chapel of 1848. It is now used for other purposes while its congregation meets round the back in an obscure hall. For generations the lower floor of the big chapel housed a weekly Sunday school involving hundreds of children over the years. There is not a word about it or its church on the Heritage Trail!

There can be few communities in the Midlands (let alone elsewhere) in which the Free Churches did not run Sunday schools, especially on Sunday afternoons. It has been a significant feature of social and religious life from around 1800 to the 1960s. In the later 19th century many of them added a whole range of other social, educational and spiritual opportunities - women's meetings, Christian Endeavour, Band of Hope, the Brigades for boys and girls, Pleasant Sunday Afternoons, and literary groups. Even 'Church of England' families used these facilities. The music hall, cinema, radio, motor car, television and bingo were later competitors for people's leisure time, but the old chapel programme can still be found. It is updated and diminished but does not deserve to be ignored as an alien quirk in the local community. The impact on the country has been enormous. In *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England 1780-1980* (1986) P B Cliff says that by 1955 83% of the English population over 16 years of age had attended Sunday schools for several years in the past, and 54% of parents were still sending their children to them.

Historic Free Church personalities should always be worthy of mention in heritage material: John Bunyan, Isaac Watts, the Wesleys, William Carey, William Booth, and C H Spurgeon at least. Of these, only John Wesley makes it easily. In a coffee-table heritage book *Villages of England* (1984, 115) Brian Bailey eventually reaches Epworth (really a small town), birthplace of the Wesleys, with its Wesley Memorial Methodist Chapel of 1889 as well as the famous Rectory. 'Nonconformist chapels have not featured much in this tour of English villages, since these tend to be a product of larger urban communities (zealous evangelists were too keen on converting large crowds to bother much with rural hamlets)'.

What nonsense! Our heritage is not just about saying 'Bunyan preached here' or 'Carey lived there'. I have looked at hundreds of applications for licences for Nonconformist places of worship from 1689 to 1852, as well as the 1851 Religious Census for much of the Midlands, and I am amazed that in fact over large areas hardly any village or hamlet failed to have some sort of organised Free Church meetings within that period. Many a house and many a former chapel can still be identified as places where considerable numbers gathered for Free Church worship and to hear the Scriptures explained, sharing together in the Spirit of Christ. Let us work to get local tourist literature to reflect this part of their community's story.

When Simon Schama was researching for the BBC TV series 'A History of Britain', he commented: 'One of the things I have come to realise is the relentless intensity of religion throughout British history, without which things would have been very different' (*Heritage Today* September 2001, 66). We are part of that 'religious intensity'. Never has there been so much understood about our Baptist past as there is in today's circle of the Baptist Historical Society. At the same time never has there been so much popular ignorance of Free Church

impact and ethos through the years. A wider appreciation of it from our past would increase our witness in the present.

Alan Betteridge