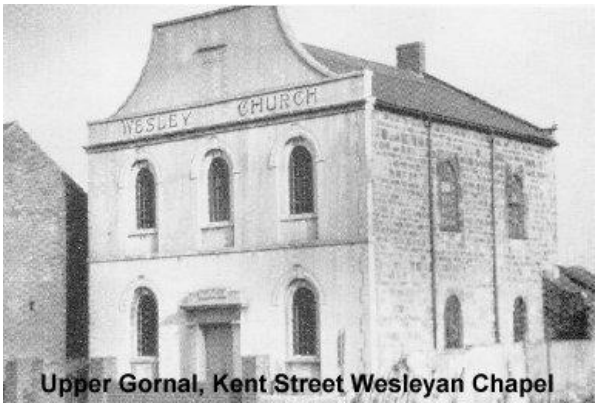
UPPER GORNAL METHODIST CHURCH

A TALE OF TWO CHAPELS

(The history of Methodism in Upper Gornal)

Part One 1832 - 1930



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Foreword

Upper Gornal Methodist Church was built over 30 years ago, following the joining of two congregations from chapels, which had been built within 100 yards of each other. For over 100 years these two chapels had served the village of upper Gornal through some of the most difficult economic and social times, including two world wars.

"The Tale of two Chapels" is one of men and women of great vision and commitment with a consuming love and devotion to God. It is an account of how our existing church in Upper Gornal came into being, volume 1 being the history of the two chapels, "Mount Zion New Connexion Chapel" (Mount Zion) and the Wesleyan Chapel (The Wesleyan).

Part 1 was written by the late Harold Hyde, and covers the period from the early 18th century to 1932. The second part from 1932 to date has still to be written. Harold was a member of the Wesleyan for his whole life, before joining the congregation of the Upper Gornal Methodist Church at its inception in 1971. Harold was a school teacher by profession and became Deputy Headmaster for Dudley Grammar School, in St James' Road, Sedgley. Harold gave his life as a Local Preacher and Church Leader, and we are grateful to have his detailed account of the early beginnings of our church.

The research and text produced by Harold is reproduced with the kind permission of his wife Marian.

Trevor Amphlett
June 2017

The Social Context

During the eighteenth-century England was in turmoil. New farming had dispossed thousands of people from the land and left them with little choice but to make their way to the nearest town. In the towns, employment could be found in the growing list of industries, which were heralding in the Industrial Revolution. The new industries could only take root in these places, which had the advantage of raw materials and position, and Dudley was such a place. Between 1750 and 1850 its population must have grown from around 5,000 to over 37,000. Upper Gornal had fewer factories, but it did supply the raw materials of coal, limestone and sandstone to the Dudley blast furnaces, and so grew at a similar rate. The picture we are left with is that of a nation on the move and not until during the last twenty years have similar social conditions been experienced once again.

The effect of this social upheaval was to produce a lack of social cohesion with all the stresses that this entailed. Initially it was the older children who left home and moved to the towns, and they in turn would have sponsored the younger ones. By this process the population of the countryside became an ageing one, whilst that of the towns grew at an alarming rate because of the virility of their youthful population. Few people travelled more than fifty miles to live in a town, but such were the problems of transport that they might just as well have emigrated to another continent.

The influx of people into the towns created not only a shortage of homes but also a paucity of church spaces. As late as 1811 it was estimated that half of the population had no means of attending worship. It was not until 1819 that parliament granted £1,000,000 for building new churches and so gave birth to the so called Commissioner's Churches. St James's, Lower Gornal was built in 1823; All Saints, Sedgley was built in 1829, and St Peter's, Upper Gornal in 1841. Had these churches been built a century earlier, Methodism might never have been born. As it was they came too late, and for nigh on one hundred years the industrial towns, with their wide-ranging social problems, could not look to the established church for spiritual help. The established church was living proof that "where there is no vision, the people perish."

This was the context into which God raised up John Wesley to bring about a reformation within the English Church.

The Birth of Methodism

Wesley had been nicknamed a Methodist during his student days at Oxford, where he had resisted the moral excesses of his day and sought to justify himself in the eyes of God through a life of scriptural holiness. It was in 1738, while attending a meeting at Aldergate Street, that he saw for the first time that holiness doesn't come about by good works, but by faith in Jesus Christ. Spurred on by his newfound faith John Wesley was thrust out to preach about his Saviour to the growing industrial areas of the country.

Wesley would dearly have loved to work within the framework of the established church but this hope was frustrated as one by one of the pulpits of the established

church were closed to him. With hindsight this might appear providential for if they had been open to him it is unlikely that he would have sought out the ones who lay beyond the reach of the church. After much soul searching Wesley took to the open air and for the next fifty years, until his death in 1791, Wesley travelled an estimated 250,000 miles in proclaiming the gospel. This is an astonishing feat even by today's standards, but incredible when we remember that it was done on horseback. Perhaps Charles Wesley had his brother in mind when he wrote:

"To spend, and to be spent, for them who have not yet my Saviour known."

It was in the industrial areas, where few churches existed, that Methodism scored its greatest triumphs. The preaching of Wesley was responsible for taking the seething destructive forces, which afflicted the working population, and through the power of the Living Christ transforming them into agencies for good. It is no idle boast that Wesley saved England from a revolution such as had taken place in France. By 1802 there were 140 Methodist preaching houses in Yorkshire and 100 in Cornwall. The Midlands was not quite so advanced and the Upper Gornal – Dudley area would have belonged to a District based on Evesham. In the last decade of the eighteenth century the Methodist cause grew at a rate of 3,000 souls a year, and in the last twenty years of the century 50,000 new members were made.

Methodism in Upper Gornal

The arrival of the spirit of Methodism in Upper Gornal is difficult to determine due to the lack of written evidence. Working class communities were not particularly literate and they were often far too busy to keep records. After two centuries even hearsay evidence is almost lacking, but there are number of possibilities.

Some time between 1750 and 1777 the great George Whitefield, Wesley's friend and mentor in open air preaching, was invited to preach in a field at Ruiton, which forms part of Upper Gornal. His sponsors were a group of radical young men who were disaffected by the parish church in Sedgley. In 1777, these same young men began to build the Ruiton Congegational church. Sixty years before the first Methodist preaching house was built, therefore, there was a dissenting voice in the village.

There was also the influence of Wesley himself. His first sortie into the local area was at the beginning of his ministry in January 1743, when he visited Wednesbury and nearly died at the hands of a mob. During the next forty years he was to make several visits to Wednesbury, three to Wolverhampton and three to Dudley. On 23 April 1764 Wesley writes in his journal that he visited Dudley and the new preaching house was "thoroughly filled." His last visit was on 27 April 1788 when he preached in Dudley and moved on to Wolverhampton to open the preaching house there. This was an important day for Upper Gornal in more ways than one. Firstly, Wesley must have ridden through the village along the track on which the two churches would later be built. Secondly, the completion of preaching houses in the nearby towns meant that there were now bases for missionary activity to the nearby villages, and furthermore, the energy that had gone into buildings was now available for this important work. It is also likely that the first visit of Wesley into the area for twenty-five years had given fresh impetus to those who were evangelically inclined.

Wesley was never happy to simply entertain his congregation, his chief aim being to enthuse all with a desire to see men saved. In 1772, he wrote to his brother Charles,

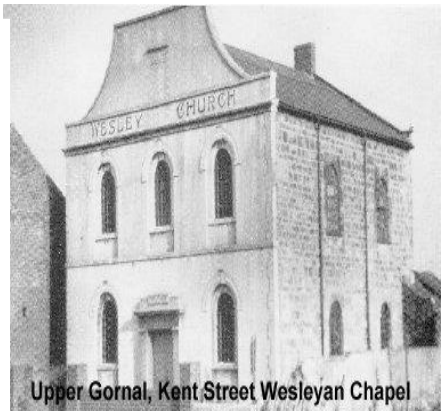
"I think every day is lost which is not……employed in this thing."

The Holy Spirit conveyed this burden to his hearers and it soon became the tradition amongst the new converts to give one day a year to the work of mission in the surrounding villages and towns. It might not seem much today but it has to be set against the background of only four or five unpaid days of holiday and a working day that commonly extended to over fourteen hours.

The "Wesleyan" Chapel

Little is known of the early Methodists in Upper Gornal, but it is safe to assume that they had some connection with Wesley's visit to Dudley. It is a fact that Himley Road Methodist church was founded as a result of this visit, and it is also a fact that some of the prominent families connected with the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, Upper Gornal (henceforth referred to as the "Wesleyan") also came from Dudley. Like the early church, the first Methodists met in local houses and it is likely that almost fifty years passed by before they had their first meeting house. This venture of faith consisted of the renting or purchase of two cottages in Club Row, which were converted into a hall. It would have been a do-it-yourself undertaking and the task is likely to have been spread over a long period of time for when the men were at work they had no time, and when work was scarce they had no money. As numbers materialised in the shape of the "Wesleyan."

It lay on the eastern side of the road from Dudley to Wolverhampton, and was built from Gornal stone with a frontage of brick. The two-storey building had a schoolroom underneath, which made use of the fact that the land fell away, the result of quarrying in the previous century. In size, shape and detail it bore much resemblance to the existing Ruiton Chapel, which had been built two years earlier at a cost of £1,282.



Upper Gornal, Kent Street Wesleyan Chapel

Finance was a real problem at this time for the newly opened church. In 1842 the Sunday School Anniversary collection was £7 – 17/ – 8d (£7.88p), and a typical Sunday collection was between 9/6d (48p) and 12/2d (61p). The Love Feast collection was 1/10d (9p) and 1/2d (6p) had been spent on the feast! Wages at this time were extremely low with a fully qualified miner only earning 14/ -d (70p) a week, when work was available. The main local industry was nail making in which a qualified man would be lucky to earn more than 9/ -d (45p) if he worked fifteen hours a day. Also, after about 1850, the general economic situation of the area declined as coal and iron ore supplies gave out and the furnaces in Dudley closed down. Nail making also experienced many difficult years after 1850 as it met with competition from the United States of America, where nails were made by machine. The people not only had little money to give, but they also had nothing in reserve for the difficult times, which they frequently experienced.

The lack of finance proved a real handicap to the physical expansion of the chapel. After its opening in 1832, several alterations were made. The Trust Accounts show items of expenditure on window frames and also to the vestry. The greatest problem, however, related to the size of the Sunday School, and in 1883 the Trustees embarked on a real venture of faith when they purchased a row of cottages to the rear of the chapel, with a view to enlarging the Sunday School. The dream died in 1895, however, when the cottages were sold for £100. Nevertheless, some Trustees were still dreaming about a new kitchen and larger classrooms when the chapel was demolished in 1970.

Leaving aside the Sunday School, which was always well attended, the minute books of the "Wesleyan" indicate that it was a struggling chapel during much of its first seventy years of life. There were just not the workers or the funds to maintain a really active witness. The economic problems of the area have already been mentioned and these cannot be dismissed, because attendance at chapel demanded Sunday "best" for both adults and children, and this must have deterred many. However, the most important contributory factor was the split brought about by the Methodist New Connexion Movement, and the formation of the Mount Zion Chapel (henceforth known as "Mount Zion"). In truth, a village as small as Upper Gornal did not have the resources to keep alive four churches, especially when two of them were made up of kith and kin.

The Methodist New Connexion Movement

The Methodist New Connexion Movement was founded in 1796 by the followers of Alexander Kilham, who objected not to the doctrines of the parent body, but to its undemocratic procedures. The first Methodist Conference had been instituted by Wesley in 1784 and consisted of one hundred preachers (i.e. ministers), in whom was vested authority for matters of discipline, administration and the stationing of preachers. Conference was a self-perpetuating body, which caused a great deal of rancour amongst those preachers who were not elected. This spirit was communicated by those ministers to the laity, who were totally excluded from Conference until 1878. The situation was not helped because the fact that the dominant figure in Methodism during the first half of the nineteenth century was Jabez Bunting, a strong and able leader, but very conservative in outlook and not very democratic. In fact, he behaved just as Wesley might have done, but with none of the latter's personal charisma. The result was a conflict, especially in those areas where the Sunday School movement had been strong. In those areas the Sunday School often predated the chapel and the laity, who were running them, resented the interference of Conference in something which they considered to be none of its business. A wave of agitation spread across the country after 1831 and in the next twenty years the Methodist Church was to lose one third of its membership to breakaway groups.

The key figure in the Black Country appears to have been a Doctor Warren. In 1832, the minister from Wednesbury complained to Jabez Bunting complaining of Doctor Warren when he wrote,

"….It has pained me much to see the state of agitation into which the Connexion has been thrown by the very unkind and I think un-principled conduct of Doctor Warren. In Dudley, the official men are nearly all disaffected."

In 1836, another letter to Jabez Bunting describes the situation in Lower Gornal, where the New Connexion faction had taken over the Himley Road Chapel. However, the Earl of Dudley, who had given the land, was brought into the affair and the Chapel was handed back to the Wesleyans. The people who were driven out must have subsequently founded the Zoar Chapel, Lower Gornal. The reason for the local agitation was that one of Doctor warren's sympathisers had been stationed in Dudley, and this provocative act had raised a local hornet's nest. A great deal of local bitterness was aroused, which can still be seen in inter-church rivalries today, although the local cause has long since been forgotten. This is borne out by a letter written by Joseph Sutcliffe (then a supernumerary in London but with Gornal connections) in 1836 to Jabez Bunting, which states,

"Methodism has now to work its way with……a Calvinistic clergy on one hand, who steal the rich from us; and with an overflowing swarm of ranters on the other, who gather up the poor. Our Trustees also offend by pewing out the chapels (i.e. charging pew rents), and leaving but a crib for the poor, and even the crib is in many instances occupied by classes of Sunday School scholars who perfume the house of God with a school effluvia."

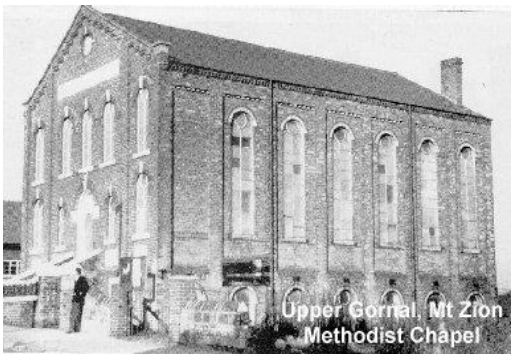
The most serious blow to befall the local Wesleyan cause, however, took place in 1836 when the pride of Wesleyans in Dudley, the recently built Wesley Chapel, in Wolverhampton Street, switched its allegiance to the New Connexionalists. So the split between the "Wesleyan" and the future "Mount Zion" must have taken place during this period of interdenominational strife in the first four or five years after the "Wesleyan" was opened.

The first place used by the New Connexionalists in Upper Gornal for their worship was a room at a public house in Sheep Cot Walk (Kent Street), belonging to Lot Carter. This was a limiting arrangement and the members turned their attention to the small chapel in Club Row, which had reverted to its former function of two cottages, now that the Wesleyans no longer needed it. The cottages were purchased, and for the next twenty five years it became the home of the Methodist New Connexion Society in Upper Gornal. A booklet published in 1903 lists some of the early worshippers as Joseph Hickman, William Hardy, Daniel Simmons, Caleb Beardsmore, Edward Evans, William Macclesfield, Mrs Phoebe Harvey, Mrs Beardsmore, Mrs Raybould and Betsy Humphries. Most of these names can be traced in the 1851 census and are interesting on a number of counts. Firstly, many of them were migrants into the local area. Secondly, most of them lived on the western side of the ridge in Pale Piece (Pale Street), and Paradise Row (Club Row). In fact, it is likely that paradise Row was so called because of the combination of the chapel and so many Methodists. It also speaks volumes of the impact that neighbour made on neighbour in terms of personal evangelism. Of the people mentioned in the list, Mrs Phoebe Harvey is the name which has come down to us as the lady whose name appears on the foundation stone of the old church. When it was originally laid on 22 July 1878 Mrs Harvey placed £100 on it as her contribution to the new Mount Zion Chapel.

Mount Zion New Connexion Chapel

William Edward Fithern did not arrive in Upper Gornal until about 1870, having moved to the Dudley area a little earlier from the Potteries. Nevertheless, he was one of the main proponents of the project to build a new chapel in Upper Gornal. It says much for his charisma that he was able to persuade a long established group that they needed a new building scheme. In an interview given many years later he recalled that many of the members did not favour the new building scheme. The meeting house in Club Row was still mortgaged for £120 and the members were worried about their ability to fill a larger building. It is likely that William Fithern received a great deal of moral support from William Foster, a Woodsetton lawyer, who not only laid one of the foundation stones, but was also responsible for much of the legal work involved.

"Mount Zion" was officially opened on Tuesday evening, 4 March 1879. The unusual timing could have been dictated by the desire to have as the preacher the Rev J Medicraft, who was a past President of the New Connexion Movement. The building cost £2,000 and was an altogether more imposing structure than the "Wesleyan" a few hundred yards down the road.



It was truly a "lamp set on a hill" and must have dominated the skyline, even when hemmed in by other buildings. It was a structure to which the original members clearly wanted too add, as money became available. The proportions of the interior were such that they must have contemplated a balcony, and the two pretend doors, which survived to the very end, would have eventually led to a vestry at the rear of the chapel. As previously stated money was short and 1878 was not a good time to be building, and the extended building works were never completed.

When the new premises were opened the meeting house in Club Row was sold in order to pay off its mortgage, which left a balance of £39 towards the new chapel. With considerable giving by the local congregation, and some help from Conference, the debt was gradually reduced, but in 1912 there was still a debt of £400. Originally, the loan for the new building had been furnished by the Ancient Order of Foresters, but in 1912 they demanded repayment because the interest rate of 4% was too low. Fortunately, the chapel had some thrifty members and one of them, John Waterfield, stepped in and saved the day. In 1936, another member Enoch Fithern, took over the mortgage, which was not finally paid off until 1945, some 66 years after the chapel was opened.

As at the "Wesleyan", Sunday School work was handicapped by a lack of space and, despite the general lack of finance, the Trustees were clearly anxious to do something about it. In 1912 the Trustees purchased a plot of land which had belonged to the state of the late Mrs Phoebe Harvey. In 1919, the Sunday School teachers purchased land from Edwin Howl of the "Quarries" and donated it to the Trustees with a request that a committee be set up to plan for a new Sunday School. The land was never

used, however, for the purpose for which it was purchased and in 1953 the land was given to the Upper Gornal Pensioners Club for their clubroom.

Trust Expenditure in the 19th Century

As far as Trust expenditure is concerned, the majority of records in existence relate to the "Wesleyan". The total budget for the year 1862, for example, was £32-11/-6d (£32.58p) and £17-9/-4d (£17.47p) came from pew rents, a very controversial issue at the time, but a tolerated problem because of their income potential. Burials in the vaults of the chapel brought in an additional £2, with the remainder coming from Sunday School and Church Anniversary collections. Compared with today the overheads were simple and colourful. A load of coal to fire the two stoves in the Sunday School cost 5/9d (29p), and the church was heated by the same stoves, with the heat entering through a grill in the schoolroom ceiling. Candles cost 5d (2p) a pound, but in 1858 gas lighting was installed, and the first quarterly bill was £1-18/-10d (£1.94p). Some Trustees must have clamoured for the return of candle power!

In 1840, a clock was purchased as a timely warning to some visiting preachers, and in 1860 they were provided with a spitting box at a cost of 10d. The removal of night soil from the earth closets was another necessary expenditure at a cost of 3/- (15p) annually. The nineteenth century church also had to pay many taxes, including income tax, District rates, Poor rates and Highway taxes, all of which added about £2 to the overheads each year.

"Mount Zion" had gas lighting from the beginning and would also have had an early form of central heating, but like the "Wesleyan" it also had a night soil problem. Vandalism was as great a problem as it is today, and hardly a year went buy when the churches did not have to spend a sizeable sum of money on window repairs. In 1911, the "Mount Zion" Trustees had a board displayed outside the chapel advertising 10/- (50p) to anyone who passed on information, which led to a prosecution for damaging windows and property!

The Early Preachers

Considering the importance of the preached Word to nineteenth century congregations, it is surprising that no records were kept of sermon texts, but fortunately circuit plans exist. The "Wesleyan" was part of the Dudley Wesleyan Circuit, which stretched from the Gornals into Darby Hand and Dudley Wood. Like most of the chapels in the Circuit it had three services on a Sunday; 10.30 a.m., 2.30 p.m. and 6.30 p.m. All three services were taken by ministers or lay preachers, a visiting preacher taking either the morning and afternoon services, or the afternoon and evening services. This was because most of the preachers walked to services and this system avoided wasted travelling time. Ministers and lay preachers worked hard, as demonstrated in the last quarter of 1859, when there were fifteen ministerial appointments at the "Wesleyan" and one communion service. No one minister had oversight of the Chapel, but all three Circuit Ministers officiated at the various meetings and services.

The Dudley Wesleyan Circuit was made up of eleven chapels and these were served by twenty one lay preachers, in addition to the ministers. James Stanton, a lay preacher who attended the "Wesleyan", preached on no fewer than fifteen occasions in one quarter. Other preachers who came to Upper Gornal were W Mobberley of Pensnett, and R Ainsbury, W Edge and W Southall of Dudley. Unlike the Primitive Methodists (The Ranters), the Wesleyans were on the conservative side of Methodism and tended to choose its lay preachers from the middle class local business community. As dissenters the professions were closed to them and preaching would have been considered a suitable intellectual outlet for their undoubted talents. Like everything connected with the movement preaching was looked upon as a highly disciplined calling, and all preachers were required to preach to the lectionary, which was printed on the circuit plan. During the weeks leading up to Christmas 1859 the congregation received a series of sermons from the book of Isaiah. The afternoon service on Christmas Day, which fell on a Sunday, was given over to the Lovefeast.

Worship and Witness

The Lovefeast came to Methodism through Wesley's connections with the Moravians. It was a kind of surrogate Last Supper, with water and buns being passed round. Wine was used in the early years, but later on water was used as Christians became convinced of the evils of drink. Total abstinence was not considered too important in the early years of Methodism, and the Wesleyan Chapel Trust Accounts show that beer was purchased for the choir! The water in the Lovefeast was drunk from a large communal cup which bore the word "Lovefeast" on the side and which sometimes has as many as three handles to help it to be passed around. The service itself was an occasion for extempore prayer and testimony, and a time for taking stock spiritually. If Christmas Day 1859 promised to be busy then there was no let up on Boxing Day, because this was traditionally the day of business meetings. At thee o'clock the Local Preachers had their meeting at King Street Chapel and this was followed by a meeting of Circuit Stewards and the Quarterly Meeting!

Throughout the nineteenth century there was considerable interest in missionary work, and this is reflected in the monthly prayer meeting, which both churches held for this purpose. The second half of the century was the great age of exploration and the map of the "Dark Continent" particularly was added to yearly by men whose names were destined to become famous. It is impossible in this age of instant communication to recall the impact that missionary stories had on Victorian chapel goers, but they must have been equal to those experienced in modern times to space and moon exploration. Towards the end of the century it became common for missionaries or furlough to visit the churches and these were looked forward to with considerable anticipation. It was not only the speakers who helped to make missionary meetings special but also the hymns. The words of hymns like "From Greenland's icy mountains" were sufficient in themselves to transport the entire congregation to lands far removed from their mundane existence in Upper Gornal. The Methodist Hymn Book declares that Methodism was born in song, and it is beyond question that in Upper Gornal music has been a vital component of worship.

In the early days at the "Wesleyan" it is believed that the singing was accompanied by a string quartet. This partly borne out by the record of a sale of a double bass for

17/6d (88p) in 1856. It also has to be remembered that many people could play a musical instrument, as it was a major feature of relaxation in a time before radio, television and other leisure activities. By 1867, the organist was being paid 10/-d (50p) a quarter for playing the organ, which was remained in place until its removal in 1968. Little money appears to have been lavished on the instrument, although the Trustees did agree to box it in during the winter of 1910, when the chapel roof was holed during a gale. The organist at the end of the 19th century was John Williams who took his drinking seriously and sometimes had to be recalled from the Red Lion next door in order to play the last hymn. The choirmaster at this time was the local draper, William Allen, whose daughter Gertrude also deputised as organist.

"Mount Zion" also sang to the accompaniment of a small orchestra during the early years. It is recorded that its members were W Waterfield (double bass), John Astley (clarinet), Joseph Hickman (violin), Abraham Allen (cello) and Henry Hyde (cornet). Eventually an English harmonium was purchased and this was played by Thomas Sheward. Later on a small pipe organ from Himley Church was installed and this was played by Mr Fazey, who was the uncle of Harold Hunt. When Mr Fazey left the District in 1899, his nephew became organist in his place and so began a lifelong association with the chapel organ. In 1908 a committee was set up to receive tenders for a new instrument and this was eventually installed in the early months of 1909. The organ was expensive but no one had any doubts that it was more fitting to the considerable talents of the young organist.

The Sunday School

The foundations of Christian education for all Methodists began in the Sunday School. The educational possibilities of the junior section of the church had been realised by Robert Raikes in 1780. He had conjured up the school out of sheer concern for the education of the underprivileged. As time passed by, however, they became an important part of the Non-Conformist strategy.

The parish church had no need to win converts for technically all the people of the parish belonged to its flock. The newer denominations like Methodism had to win support or die, and so the Sunday School became a "sprat to catch a mackerel". The chapels provided a service that most people were unable to afford, namely an elementary education. Unless one could read, write and count, there was no chance of breaking out of the poverty trap. The first detailed census of the century in 1851 reveals that even the humblest parents were happy to describe their children as\ scholars. What this meant in real terms was that they attended a Sunday School or a day school run on chapel premises. There was only one conceivable text book, and that was the Word of God. In a short space of time paraphrased bibles were printed by the Bible Society and also large cards on which were printed the catechisms which children learnt by rote. Neither was arithmetic difficult, because no other great book in the world contains so many references to number. Adding loaves and fishes, and subtracting Judas from the twelve disciples formed part of a carefully planned training in numeracy.

It is likely that the "Wesleyan" had a Sunday School right from the beginning in the converted cottages in Club Row, but no records survive. However, after the move to

Kent Street many records survive and we have a fairly clear picture of how the Sunday School operated. In order to attract scholars it had to be run efficiently and produce a feeling of confidence amongst the local population. Accordingly, the "Wesleyan" Sunday School was run on the strictest lines until the end of the 19th century. The first class was called the "Letter Box Class" and they used a wooden frame into which letters slotted in order to make up words. From there children progressed to the "Alphabet Class" where, with the aid of a slate, they were taught to write. In their final years children graduated to the "Select Classes" which were entrusted to the most experienced teachers. Needless to add, the two sexes were strictly segregated, even up to the adult classes. All would-be teachers had to undergo a period of training. They were placed on "trial", and after a year, during which they were observed, they would become full time teachers. The discipline was rigid, and records reveal that several prospective teachers were asked to serve another year "on trial". The assessor in these situations was the Inspector, who was appointed by the Teachers Meeting, annually. Records have virtually no reference to teaching methods, but this is nit surprising because the necessary skills were acquired by simply having passed through the Sunday School, and noting how others did it. For this reason it would have been difficult to make a teacher from a new convert because they would not have been exposed to the message. The major items of discussion at most meetings were concerned with appointments and the organisation of special events. The Annual Treat always took place on "Tipton Wake Tuesday", and was held in Ellowes Park. The food was prepared before hand, but the tea was made in the park, and the park keeper's wife was paid 3/-d (15p) for boiling the water. The scholars did not have to pay for the feast, which contained "two types of cake", but friends had to pay 6d (2.5p). The next Annual Meeting would always begin with a vote of thanks to Sir Horace Paul, for making the park available. The teachers also had another treat, which was either the following day, on Gospel End Common, or on Boxing day, in the Sunday School. Sometimes the members of the "Select Classes" were invited to join them; a special treat for those who had run the race during the "Annual Treat".

The Sunday School Anniversary was clearly the high spot of the year for both chapels, and it usually took place on a Sunday in May.

In the early days of Sunday School work at the "Wesleyan" it was a kind of graduation day on which scholars were presented with certificates to say that they had reached certain standards in the 3 R's; reading, writing and arithmetic. Recitations based on the bible and catechisms would also have been a feature. Children who participated in anniversary services were usually rewarded with a "hanky", but 1899 was a memorable year for "Wesleyan" scholars because "heliotrope scarves" were given. Limited space on the platform meant that older children had to sit underneath and augment the singing from there. The problem was eventually overcome with the purchase of a new platform at accost of £6-5/-d (£6.25p). Children on the platform were always immaculately dressed, with parents encouraged to pay into the Clothing Fund throughout the year, inaugurated in 1889.

The second high spot of the year for Sunday School scholars was the awarding of prizes. The standard practice until the end of the century was to award tickets as the children left school, and these could later be redeemed for prizes. In 1902, in the "Wesleyan", the Annual Prize Distribution was introduced, accompanied by a "star"

recording system for each attendance. A choice of books was available and a regular attendee could choose books up to the value of 1/8d (7p).

From time to time there were other attractions introduced. In 1882, the scholars of the "Wesleyan" Sunday School were presented with Jubilee medals to celebrate fifty years of the existence of the Sunday School. However, it was the concerts put on at the "Wesleyan", which created the greatest stir. One commentator summed them up this way,

"Here were all things required for social intercourse; recitals, songs, lectures (with or without magic lantern), organised games and talk. It was a liberal education. It may have been a narrow society, but it was one which pulsed with life."

The Dudley Herald recorded on 1 December 1890,

"The well known entertainers from Upper Gornal Wesleyan gave a recital of the sacred poem, "Joseph and his Brethren". Although the weather was unfavourable, the piece was sufficiently popular to attract a large audience, for the room was filled to excess".

Evidently something went seriously wrong, as by 1891the Trustees banned dramatic performances from their premises! Slide shows depicting famous bible stories, however, continued to be well received, and in those pre-Hollywood days there was none of the ambivalence that the silver screen would present in later years.

Sunday School work at "Mount Zion" was organised on very similar lines to that of the Wesleyan Chapel. The Chapel had a day school attached to it during the years in Club Row, in the charge of Mrs Cartwright. It is likely, however, to have disappeared before the chapel was moved to Kent Street, because in 1870 an Education Act made education compulsory for all children, and independent ventures became superfluous. The Sunday School superintendent in the early days was Job Hyde, but when the new chapel was opened in 1879, William Fithern took over the office. Later on in the century Sam Hyde became superintendent and he held office for some twenty years. Discipline for Sunday School teachers was just as strict as at the "Wesleyan", and at each session of the Sunday School it \was customary for the superintendent to call out the names of teachers on a register, before teachers in turn marked the class registers.

In the early years "Mount Zion" held no Prize Day, as the cost of books would have been to great a charge on the slender resources of the Sunday School. Instead, each child was given a cardboard cheque as they left Sunday School, and twelve of these cheques could be exchanged for a brass token. Four brass tokens could be exchanged for a Sunday School hymn book, and eight tokens for a Church Hymnal.

The Sunday School Anniversary was equally the highlight of the year for the Sunday School at "Mount Zion". It was so popular that only one girl from each family was allowed on the platform. It is recalled that on the Sunday when practices were announced there were many tearful children, as they argued over whose turn it was that year. Decision Day was another feature of the Mount Zion Chapel Sunday School calendar. Usually this was led by one of the senior teachers. The importance of committing one's life to the Lord Jesus was stressed and scholars were invited to

sign a decision card. On the next Sunday the name of the Sunday School teacher who had secured the highest number of decisions was read out!

The Sunday School Treat was held on the same day as that of the "Wesleyan", but the venue was Bert Leek's field. Mr Leek had strong associations with "Mount Zion", and his field was natural for the occasion. The field is nowadays obliterated by the Burton Road and Old Park Road housing developments, but in those\ days there was a small cottage at the top of the field, in which lived a Mrs Rowlands, whose house was used for making the tea.

Mid week activities for children were catered for by the "Band of Hope", which met on a Monday evening. This movement had been founded in 1896 to save young people from the "specific evil of drink". It seems to have been in every sense a forerunner of the more recent "Sunshine Corner", with choruses being sung, quizzes being organised and a suitable message as the high spot. The "Band of Hope" was organised at "Mount Zion" by Mrs Blunn, with the favourite chorus seeming to be "Yield not to Temptation". "The Band of Hope" was also held at the "Wesleyan", where Mrs A J Wilson was in charge. In 1903, she became Vice President of the Dudley Branch, a rare honour for a woman in those days.

The Men and Women of the Early Chapels

What of the men and women who guided both chapels through the years of the late nineteenth century and up until the First World War? Records are scarce relating to "Mount Zion", but Trust minute books for the "Wesleyan" have survived, giving some reference to the pioneers of Methodism in Upper Gornal. There is no doubt, however, that one of the key men of the early Mount Zion was William Edward Fithern, whose influence has been referred to earlier in this story. William Fithern was born in 1842 in Ashton under Lyme. When he was about 16 he moved to the Dudley area at about the time they started to exploit the Thick Coal. He married a mine-owner's daughter when he was 26 and became a partner but later seems to have dissolved the partnership and struck out on his own. He lived in Upper Gornal at the end of his life, having been a Staffs County Councillor, Governor of Dudley Grammar School, been on the Board of Guardians and held several posts in the Upper Gornal Mount Zion Methodist Chapel board. He died in 1929.

Although early records are sparce for Mount Zion, eEven for the "Wesleyan" it is not until the third Trust of 1869 that we know anything about the men involved, other than their names. It is in the Trust minutes of that year that we are introduced to John and James Stanton, who between them were to hold all the important offices in the chapel at that time. The two other active members of the Trust were William Allen and Thomas Ivens. The latter had a small general store in Kent Street, but most of his time must have been taken up as Secretary of the Sunday School. Time and time again poor Mr Ivens was instructed "to visit", "to obtain", and "to seek the services of"! In 1893, ill health forced him to leave the district and his departure left a vacuum in the Sunday School that was difficult to fill. For ten years after his leaving, the once immaculate minute book is often incomplete, and several people took on his job, but all lacked the integrity or Thomas Ivens. In 1902 Abel Beardsmore became Secretary, and he was joined in 1910 by William Henry Potts, and together they formed a

partnership which would see the chapel through some of its most momentous years. William Henry Potts had \recently married a daughter of William Allen, and had attended the Wesleyan although an Anglican by background. In 1910 he was asked to lead the Adult Class, and in 1916 became the Superintendent of the Sunday afternoon Sunday School.

William Allen was the Sunday School "Inspector" amongst other jobs, and together with his wife, was responsible for organising many of the parties that punctuated the life of the Sunday School. Mrs Allen must have been a highly regarded lady, for on one occasion her decision to resign from the Sunday School prompted the meeting to send "a deputation of four men" to get her to change her mind! The Allens took over the shop, which had once belonged to Thomas Ivens, and this continued to provide the chapel with an ear to what was going on in the village. The Allens' daughter Gertie was also active in the life of the chapel; she taught in the Sunday School, deputised on the organ, and was often the only woman on those committees whih "needed the female point of view." Later on she took over her father's shop and became a well-known figure to generations of the village folk.

Alderman Henry Walker was, however, the most influential voice in the "Wesleyan". A local politician and retired bank clerk in St James' Road, Dudley, he had the ear of the minister, and personally masterminded the new 1907 Trust. By 1907 only he and William Allen remained as Trustees from the early dominant figures, the new Trustees now including Abel Beardsmore, Henry Harris, John Albert Wilson, and Harold Baker.

The new Trust consisted of just six men and strengthens the conviction that outside of the Sunday School, a great deal of work was undertaken by comparatively few people. Henry Harris, the village barber, had been active in the chapel for many years, but his brother in law, Abel Beardsmore, an insurance agent and boot maker, was a comparatively young man, and for him this new position marked the beginning of a service to the lord which dominated the spiritual life of the church for the next forty years. John Albert Wilson was a coach builder from Dudley, who was also the brother in law of Abel Beardsmore. He was very active in the "Band of Hope" movement, and it was there that he met his future wife. Although they lived in Dudley, the Wilsons and their young family walked the journey to Upper Gornal three times every Sunday. The final member of the new Trust was the young Harold Baker, who is simply describe in the minutes as a clerk.

The women in the chapel are by and large an assumed presence, because the various church committees were dominated by men and it is the record of these which has survived the years. It was in the Sunday School, however, which gave the woman an outlet for their undoubted talents. It was with a sense of great sadness that many women within the Sunday School subsequently left the chapel as they married unsympathetic partners. Three women who did not leave the chapel, however, were Catherine Fellows, Ida Harris and Annie Oakley. Catherine is better known as Kate Bennett, and she was the first of the large Fellows family to take up active work in the chapel, remaining loyal to her cause throughout the whole of her life. Ida became the wife of the future pastor of the local Pentecostal Church, and Annie married a Mr Sadler and became the chapel caretaker. From the chapel house she also found time

to operate a sweet shop, which helped her to keep in contact with the children form the Sunday School.

The Great War (1914 – 1918)

It is possible to read through the Trust minute books of the "Wesleyan", which cover the momentous years of the Great War, and have the mistaken impression that there was little effect on the chapel. However, an examination of the related Trust Accounts highlights pressures which had not been previously evident. Firstly, the minute books are generally incomplete, which is unusual in it. Secondly, by 1916 Sunday School teachers are being accepted without a "trial" period and they are also getting younger. In that year, the sixteen-year-old Dan Fellows joined his sister on the Sunday School staff. Experience appears to no longer be equated purely with age, as in the past.

The Preaching Plan also shows that Messrs Beardsmore, Potts and Wilson had been given appointments, presumably because of the number of preachers engaged in active service. In 1915, special collections were taken to enable ministers to deal with problems, which they encountered while on active service. The Zeppelin raids in 1917 caused some worries and the insurance premium for the next two years was raised by 8/- (40p) as a precaution.

The Sunday School minutes of the "Wesleyan" show that twelve young men were serving in the forces by 1917. One of the first to join up was John T Fellows, who was later joined by his brother Isaac. It would seem that nobody closely connected with the chapel was killed in service, but for twelve men to have been conscripted from one small chapel must have created some difficulties for the remaining members.

During the Great War not everything was full of gloom. The 1917 Sunday School Anniversary was the highest in 44 years, with a collection of £50. In April of that year, Miss Howl presented the prizes to the Sunday School scholars, and listened to a report which announced record attendances. In all, there were 164 children on the register, 50 adults and 16 teachers, representing an improvement of 30 pupils on the previous year. The average Sunday School attendances were 101 in the morning, and 147 in the afternoon. It was almost as if the carnage in Flanders, which left few of the families in the village untouched, had prompted something of a religious revival amongst the young.

Whilst there are few remaining records of the period left regarding "Mount Zion", it is clear that it was this chapel suffered the greater loss of manpower, as the memorial window, now located in the current Upper Gornal Methodist Church, testifies. In all, 12 men were lost, of which 2, William Hyde and Ralph Worton, were active in the Sunday School. However, the most damaging effect of the war was the way it affected society at large, and many of the young men who were demobilised did not return to the fellowship of the churches.

The years after the Great War were ones of disillusionment for the nation. The years of the post war prosperity were short lived and the dream of "the land fit for heroes"

was quickly dissipated in the years of the depression. The years of depression also became years of a crisis in belief. Numbed by the agonies of the war, which barely left a family untouched, the ordinary people of the country found faith difficult. Leslie Davison, in his book "Sender and the Sent", wrote,

"The First World War" shook the western mind into a realisation that humanity could destroy itself, and that organised religion was powerless to restrain such madness…….they had lost their faith in the supernatural, in Providence, and in God."

C E M Joad, a popular philosopher of the Twenties, put it this way,

"I have no Bible, no creed: the war has shot both out of my hands. I am ignorant. I have lost my nerve. All I know is that I must find the way of life for myself, and all of us, or we shall surely perish."

Of the churchgoers who returned in 1918, many never went to church again. The church in Upper Gornal met this onslaught in a number of ways, and some of them were to have unexpected effects.

The Union of the Methodist Church

A union of the three main divisions of the Methodist Church (Wesleyan, New Connexion, and Primitives) had been voiced for a considerable time, but as church attendances tumbled in the Twenties and Thirties, it became an absolute necessity. The Depression years were also attacking the Church materially, and it was argued that one United Methodist Church would permit a better use of manpower and buildings, as well as presenting a better witness to the reconciling work of Christ. B In 1922, the Trustees of the "Wesleyan", in common with all other Methodist churches, were consulted about the proposed union. In a remarkably long statement, proposed by Abel Beardsmore and seconded by William Potts, the Trustees thanked the commissioners for their spirit of friendship and co-operation, but rejected union "because of the grave differences among our own people." It was a unanimous decision and there the matter rested until 1925. At the Annual Trustees Meeting of that year a vote was taken and seven of the members voted against organic union, one member voted for union and four men abstained. Presumably the same kind of consultation took place at "Mount Zion", but as no Trustees Meetings were held at the chapel between January 1919 and April 1925, there is no record of the vote taken.

In 1929, the Methodist Church Union Act received the support of the House of Commons and the Church was re-united, although clearly against the will of the "Wesleyan". Clearly the union meant little to the folk at "Mount Zion", as Trustee meetings of that year had little reference to such matters, there focus being more related to their own chapel, including the appointment of a new caretaker.

One of the immediate consequences of the union was that the name of the "Wesleyan" had to be changed. Henceforth, it was known as Upper Gornal Methodist Church, although the local folk still referred to it as the "Wesleyan". The Trustees had sympathy towards this view because when the front of the church was re-plastered, they blotted out the "an", and changed its name to "Wesley". Two letters of a name,

and a sharing of the same minister and preachers, seems to have been the sum total of difference that the union meant at this time!

Mission and Evangelism

Mission in both churches during the early years of the chapels was clearly centred on the Sunday School, and through serving its locally community in a caring and compassionate way. It is clear that both chapels had been slightly influenced by the visit of Dwight L Moody and Ira Sankey to this country during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and their hymn book, "Sacred Songs and Solos", was the most commonly used hymns book after the Methodist hymnal.

The first reference to a suggested mission in the Leaders meeting minutes of the "Wesleyan" is in 1915 when the minister, Rev John G Pearson, suggested that it might be a good idea to have a mission during the following winter. Nothing more was subsequently heard of the matter and we can assume that it never took place.

In 1922, the evangelist Penfold came to the area and held a series of missions in various places. The campaign commenced in a field in Lake Street, Lower Gornal, in which is marquee was pitched, and it later moved to a field in Sedgley, now the Dormston School playing field. There were also public meetings in some of the local churches. Penfold was a magnetic preacher and attracted great crowds to his meetings. Many people in both chapels committed their lives to Christ and a miniature revival took place. This upsurge of spirituality led to several young people in both chapels becoming Sunday School teachers.

The campaign, however, which was to have the greatest impact on the two chapels took place at the Walsall Hall. These were the meetings held by the Jeffrey's' brothers. Stephen Jeffreys had been a miner in South Wales, and George Jeffreys worked in the Co-op in Maser, and they had been greatly blessed by the Holy Spirit during the 1904 –1905 revival in South Wales. Both these men had been influenced by the Bradford plumber, Smith Wigglesworth, who had been baptised by the Holy Spirit, and given the gift of speaking in tongues, through the Keswick movement in northern England. The Jeffreys' brother's campaign was aimed at making known the Bible teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit, and on Spiritual healing. Members from both chapels visited the campaign and were so affected by it that in 1932, a small band of Christians from both societies broke away and eventually formed their own Pentecostal Church, in Eve Lane.

The "Wesleyan" and "Mount Zion" were beginning to see the benefits of these missions and for the first time since the First World War detected an increase in spiritual desire within the nation. The future of the two chapels looked bright as they responded to the spiritual needs of the growing village of Upper Gornal. What happened next will be the subject of the second part of our story.