
Methodist Expansion in an Industrial City



Sheffield's 'Victoria Hall' in
British Imperialism and a
Postcolonial Critique



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Introduction

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Britain witnessed a phase of mass imperial expansion; a period fueled by the country's ambition in establishing itself as a dominant empire, asserting local, western forms of 'order' in other countries. Separately, a protestant movement founded by theologian 'John Wesley' in the 18th century, 'Methodism' did not gain prominence within imperialistic ideologies until the peak of the British Empire (a period known as 'High Imperialism') in the 19th century, when Christian themes aligned with those of social reform – the qualities that appeared to define a 'divinely ordained' British empire.

Within Britain, Methodism became particularly palpable in Sheffield; a city which prided itself on its industrial contributions to the country's imperial economy (exporting steel goods to overseas colonies). Ironically, Sheffield's core imperial input was directly juxtaposed by the anti-abolitionist values placed on the workers who propped up this economy, as per 'Michael Sadler's' findings in his 1832 'Parliamentary Investigation': "conditions in the textile factories... The evidence... is representative rather than exceptional"¹. In an effort to address and promote the teachings of Methodism, missions such as 'The Victoria Hall' were established in Sheffield. Constructed in 1906, Victoria Hall served as a beacon for colonial progression, marking Sheffield as a prominent city within the development of the empire for collaborating industrial and moral ideas. Victoria Hall thus influenced architectural ideals in various colonial projects – whether it's a display of cultural dominance, morality or power, Victoria Hall provides a local perspective on imperial themes on a global scale.

The core of this essay explores Victoria Hall's position in the religious and ideological landscape of imperialism, focusing on the colonial narratives played out through the church's missionary work, architectural symbolism and morality. It initially reviews Sheffield from its religious and industrial journey during the expansion of the British Empire, exhibiting how the city's economic achievements in the industrial sector reflect those of Britain's desires abroad. The essay then provides a detailed overview of the architectural elements deployed in the building, understanding their symbolic intentions in function, design and relevance in colonial religious projects. Finally, a fundamental reflection is drawn onto the heritage of Victoria Hall from a post-colonial perspective, posing a discussion of its place within contemporary society and whether buildings like Victoria Hall should either be recontextualised in modern western society.



Figure 1 – Evidence from Michael Sadler's report on conditions within textile factories, with an outline on the average age of (industrial) workers

Sheffield's Industrial and Religious Landscape during High Imperialism

Due to its favourable geographic location in close proximity to various UK cities and resources such as coal, iron ore and water (e.g. The River Don), Sheffield became a key hub in industrial manufacturing and exportation, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries as imperialistic pressures and colonial expansion forced a demand for a locally dedicated workforce who could pioneer industrial processes and satisfy challenging exportation requirements. With the development of Benjamin Huntsman's 'Crucible Steel Process'², Henry Bessemer's 'Bessemer Converter'³, completion of integrated manufacturing facilities such as the 'Sheaf Works'⁴ and a swift population increase of '14,531 in 1736 to 135,310 in 1851, reaching 380,793 by 1901'⁵, "by the mid-19th century, Sheffield was producing 90% of the steel in Britain and almost half of Europe's output"⁶. However, the grandeur and fascination of these industrial feats overshadowed a major social crisis within Sheffield's working class community, one that consisted of exploitative labour practices, widespread poverty and inadequate working conditions.

Whilst industrialisation cemented Sheffield's position on a global scale, it conversely affected the community that supported this sector. Long hours, hazardous work environments and subpar wages influenced a vulnerable community on a moral and even spiritual scale. In addition to Michael Sadler's findings, a report from the 'Royal Commission on the Employment of Children' in 1863 outlined

¹ 'Life of Nineteenth-Century Workers — Evidence given before the Sadler Committee (1831-1832)', Victorianweb.org <<https://www.victorianweb.org/history/workers1.html>> [accessed 24 March 2025]

² The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Crucible Process', Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017

³ 'Bessemer Converter | Metallurgy | Britannica', Encyclopedia Britannica

⁴ 'Sheaf Works - Graces Guide', Gracesguide.co.uk <https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Sheaf_Works> [accessed 20 April 2025]

⁵ Office for National Statistics, A Vision of Britain through Time: Population of Sheffield, 1801–1901 <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10106088/cube/TOT_POP> [accessed 17 April 2025]

⁶ The South Yorkshire Steel Industry and the Industrial Revolution, ResearchGate, p. 118.

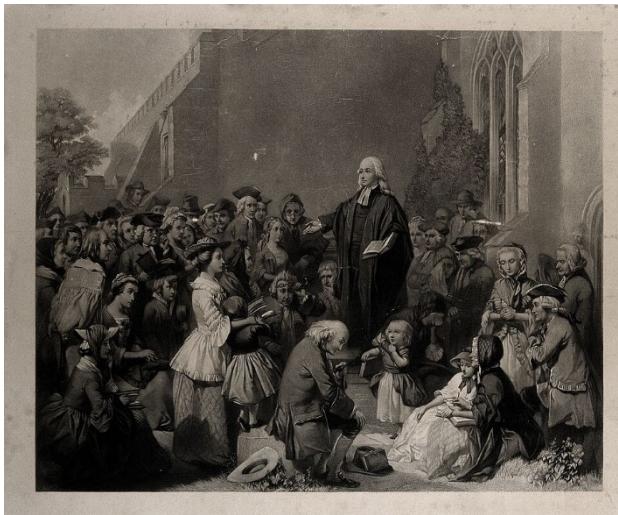


Figure 2 – Depiction of John Wesley's visit to Sheffield, preaching to crowds of working class individuals who sought enlightenment

that industrial workers within Sheffield, specifically grinders, would begin work as early as eight years old⁷, ten years younger than the current legal minimum for hazardous occupations⁸. Continuous exposure to the ‘metallic dust’ when manufacturing steel products without any adequate protection led to the development of “grinders asthma”⁷, which at an early age can be detrimental to the respiratory system and ultimately fatal. In the midst of these social challenges, Methodism arose as a beacon of ‘hope’ and ‘solution’ through devotion and faith for those who sought refuge in moral sanctuary in the context of economic and mental hardship.

John Wesley outlined his visits to Sheffield in his journal. Wesley communicated ideas of reaching forms of ‘inner-peace’ and social discipline through spirituality, touching those rigged by the irrational principles of industrial capitalism⁹. Evidence within David Hempton’s ‘Methodism and Politics in British Society’ outlines the impact preaching had on the working class community, suggesting that towards the end of the 19th century, Sheffield’s religious culture was deeply rooted with the principles of Methodism, celebrating ideas of ‘social progression’ through ‘charity’, ‘literacy campaigns’ and more¹⁰.

1906 indicated a transformative year for Methodism within Sheffield through the completion of ‘The Victoria Hall’. Designed by ‘Flockton & Gibbs’¹¹ and located within the central region of the city, it symbolised the divine presence at the heart of Sheffield - a marker of the ‘physical’ presence of Methodism. Victoria Hall highlighted the Methodist desire to enlighten and moralise Sheffield’s urban population. With a seating capacity for over 450 people and adjacent spaces for Methodist educational activities, The Victoria Hall was innovative for Sheffield¹² – a true reflection of the city’s value and conviction in Methodism. The building’s devotion to Methodism as a fundamental part of Britain’s imperial desire is reinforced by the timeframe of construction during the height of colonial expansion – a symbol of the intersection between imperial goals and spirituality.

The Victoria Hall suggests that whilst contrasting themes at first glance, religion and industrialisation were symbiotically functioning to uplift one another. Whilst the economic success of industrial manufacturing funded the construction and expansion of religious buildings, religion in turn rationalised the genuine, negative consequences of industrialisation.

Victoria Hall’s Architectural Symbolism & Role in British Imperialism

As suggested by the sheer grandeur and scale of this religious site, this building does not solely mark a Methodist accolade within the urban community, but a key moment in the overall make-up of Britain’s imperial story. Its prominent location at the heart of the city adjacent to the Town Hall and commercial centre can be viewed as a spatial claim, alluding to the imperial principle of ‘mapping authority’¹³ to enforce symbolic and urban dominance.

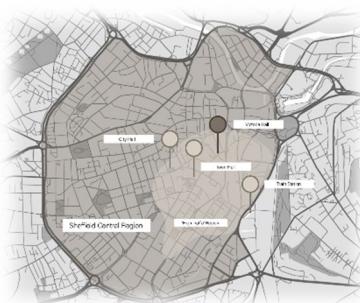


Figure 3 – Diagram emphasising the social dominance Victoria Hall had relative to its location – sat adjacent to the City Hall, Town Hall and Train Station, all within a highly central region

⁷ Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture, Part II: Evidence from Industrial Districts, Parliamentary Papers (London: HMSO, 1862), Appendix on Sheffield. Marxists.org <<https://www.marxists.org/history/england/government/1862/childrens-commission-report.pdf>> [accessed 19 April 2025]

⁸ Health and Safety Executive, Young People at Work: Guidance for Employers (2023) <https://www.hse.gov.uk/young-workers/employer/risks.htm> [accessed 17 April 2025].

⁹ John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. by Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth Press, 1909), II, pp. 222–224.

¹⁰ David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 55.

¹¹ Sheffield Society of Architects, The Flockton Archive <https://www.sheffieldsocietyofarchitects.org.uk/the-flockton-archive> [accessed 17 April 2025]

¹² ‘Victoria Hall Community —’, Victoria Hall Events and Conferencing Sheffield <<https://www.victoriahallsheffield.org/our-community>> [accessed 20 April 2025]

¹³ Hilary M. Carey, *Empire of Hell: Religion and the Campaign to End Convict Transportation in the British Empire, 1788–1875* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 200–202.

The building's construction during the height of High Imperialism suggests it had been introduced into a climate where nonconformist denominations – like that of Methodism – had already become deeply embedded and intertwined with the principles and teachings of imperial standards. Until its swift expansion in the late 18th century, Methodism initially existed as a community-driven mission amongst the socially and economically oppressed as a means of moral and spiritual outlet, against the principles of powerful institutions such as the Church of England typically aligned with the interests of the elite. Churches in industrially fuelled cities like that of the Victoria Hall in Sheffield represented the intersection of spiritual purpose and industrial prosperity – a physical justification of Britain's imperialistic nature, housing the methodist 'moral mission'.

The architectural language of the Victoria Hall methodically promoted these ideals – constructed through a Neo-Renaissance and Edwardian Baroque lens, the building showcased its efficiency as a multi-purpose civic space through a monumental yet versatile auditorium, accompanied by adjacent smaller facilities that hosted all the activities relevant to the methodist moral scope. Spatially and visually, the building was an imperial representation of authority and civility. Its versatility in being able to accommodate for lectures, social programmes and more encouraged the attributes of discipline and goodwill that were expected in methodist attitudes – a root in the make-up of the "civilising mission"¹⁴. The Victoria Hall can be understood as a reflection of this ideology, specifically aimed at forming the ideal imperial citizen. Whether it's to uplift or instruct, the hall communicated the idea of an imperial moral factory; where through missionaries abroad there is a production of the metaphorical conversion of non-western and working class individuals to members of the same civilised group by aligning their spiritual interests with that of Britain's political desires. We can see this in the creation of native holidays such as Empire Day¹⁵, where methodist congregations were asked to celebrate empire by donating (frequently) to overseas missions, passively funding these "civilising missions" under the label of religion and compassion¹⁶.

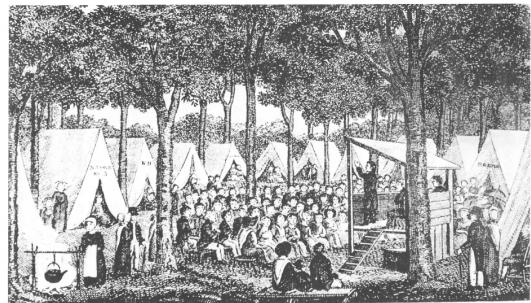


Figure 4 – Depiction of an 'early-stage' Methodist camp, where congregations would receive spiritual enlightenment

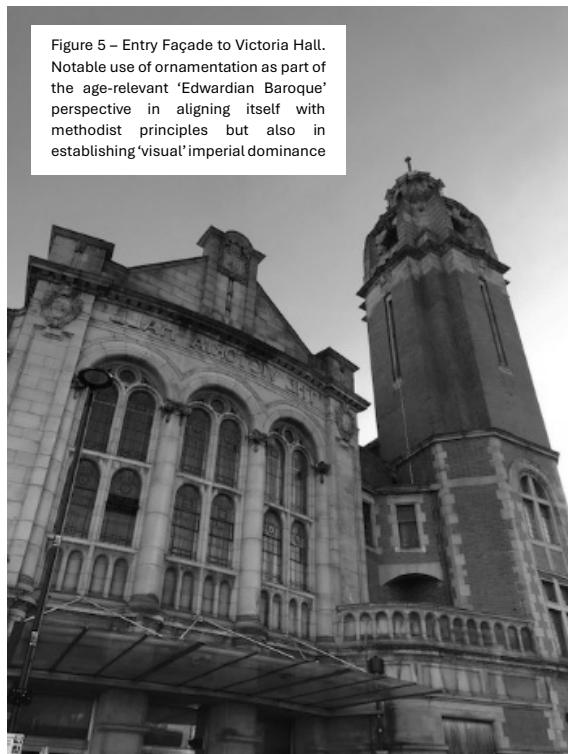


Figure 5 – Entry Façade to Victoria Hall. Notable use of ornamentation as part of the age-relevant 'Edwardian Baroque' perspective in aligning itself with methodist principles but also in establishing 'visual' imperial dominance



Figure 6 – Visual of 'Empire Day' Celebrations in Sheffield – vast crowds and youth representation in suggesting the longevity of imperial order

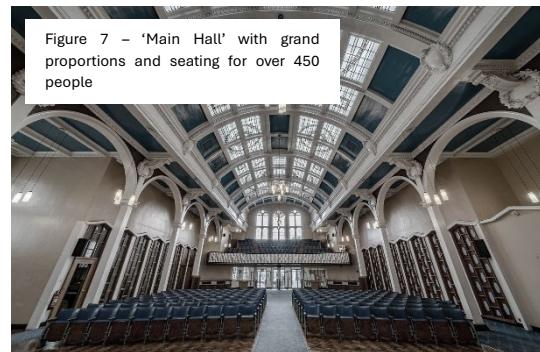


Figure 7 – 'Main Hall' with grand proportions and seating for over 450 people

¹⁴ Jeffrey Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 113–116.

¹⁵ John Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 92–95.

¹⁶ Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 112–117.

This architectural trend continues as the focus is drawn into the details of the building: the stained glass ceilings, prominent use of arches, red brick, stone dressings, spires and pinnacles. Whilst some features are typical to Christian and Methodist architecture as references to teachings in the bible, the density of these features reinforced the themes of religious conviction and notably imperial dominance, as they were consistent with buildings like museums and town halls – a correlation displaying the aesthetic language of empire.

From its minute architectural features to dominant position within Sheffield's urban landscape, The Victoria Hall indicates just how involved Methodism and subsequently imperial ideology was in everyday British life. Victoria Hall outlines how empire is not only maintained on the battlefields through military and political presence, but within the missions that moulded moral awareness.

Postcolonial Perspectives and Moral Reassessment

At the time of this analysis, colonial institutions like that of Victoria Hall prompt a debate: due to their roles in rationalising, maintaining and promoting the ideologies of Empire through spirituality, should these buildings be recontextualised or reassessed? A site programmed for spiritual devotion, the Hall was not a complete imperial administration; however, as this analysis has discussed, the Hall operated as a unit of a nationwide effort to reinforce imperial ideologies passively through spiritual, cultural and educational frameworks.

In her book, Catherine Hall outlines the 'moral duality' between the "civilised Christian" and "uncivilised other"¹⁷, advertised by overseas missions as part of Britain's imperial project. We can see that the methodist project preyed on vulnerable and naïve labourers who sought for a means of extraction from their economic and social misery through the divine teachings of spirituality. These narratives and morals were often promoted through pamphlets, sermons and lecture. Typically hosted at institutions like Victoria Hall, they frame the importance of British intervention and imperial nature in spirituality, and how an imperially 'civil' person is a spiritual one.

Claire Midgley further raises discussion in her book about institutions exactly like The Victoria Hall being used to "silence alternative perspectives"¹⁸. Edward Said reinforces this idea of oppression, arguing how cultural institutions control which voices are celebrated and which ones are silenced in the best interest of the imperial image¹⁹.

However, buildings like Victoria Hall are not completely paralysed in their initial imperial functions. As of recent times, the Hall has been completely re-purposed to serve the contemporary urban community with food banks, community events and more¹² – all values testament to an inclusive culture. The space is now configured to cater for a more diverse population – migrants, refugees or visitors of different faiths, we can see the hall correcting its imperial mistakes, as this diverse population consists of those originally affected by the legacies of the British Empire.

The hall's social transformation prompts a 'moral reassessment', as the complex history of this building celebrates the idea of reflection, rather than ignoring the past.

Conclusion

A building home to a complex legacy, The Victoria Hall demonstrates a past where religious conviction and imperial ideology converged. Today, Victoria Hall's role in the community allows the opportunity for 'reimagination' – a way in allowing us to engage in a form of 'cultural repair', confronting the uncomfortable areas of an imperial past. The Victoria Hall suggests that buildings are never 'neutral' - they are moulded by the values of their time. Whilst the building stands as a symbol of the complexities of British imperialism, it also exists as a space where this legacy can be revised toward an honest and ethical future.



Figure 8+9+10 – Other activities / adjacent spaces to the principal hall, catering to diverse demographics of people and leaning into more contemporary and pluralistic values

¹⁷ Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 20–23.

¹⁸ Clare Midgley, *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 54–56.

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 9–10.



Visual Interpretation of 19th century methodist challenges from a post-colonial perspective

A desperate and deprived working class initially seeking spirituality, consequently shackled by the intersection of imperial desire. This diagram underlines the duality between the promotion of civil values through spirituality and the hidden 'funding' of these values at the expense of a socially and economically 'tired' demographic.

Bibliography

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- 2 The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Crucible Process', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2017
- 3 'Bessemer Converter | Metallurgy | Britannica', *Encyclopedia Britannica*
- 4 'Sheaf Works - Graces Guide', *Gracesguide.co.uk* <https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Sheaf_Works> [accessed 20 April 2025]
- 5 Office for National Statistics, A Vision of Britain through Time: Population of Sheffield, 1801–1901 <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10106088/cube/TOT_POP> [accessed 17 April 2025]
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- 13 Hilary M. Carey, *Empire of Hell: Religion and the Campaign to End Convict Transportation in the British Empire, 1788–1875* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 200–202.
- 14 Jeffrey Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 113–116.
- 15 John Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 92–95.
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- 17 Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 20–23.
- 18 Clare Midgley, *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 54–56.
- 19 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 9–10.

Images

Fig 1 - The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2025). child labour. In Encyclopedia Britannica.

Fig 2 - *Methodist Church of Great Britain*. (n.d.). Wikiwand.com. Retrieved April 25, 2025, from https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Methodist_Church_of_Great_Britain

Fig 4 - *History of Methodism*. (n.d.). Firstumchurch.com. Retrieved April 25, 2025, from <https://firstumchurch.com/methodism-101>

Fig 5 - *The Victoria Hall*. (2020, February 4). Sheffielder.net. <https://sheffielder.net/2020/02/04/the-victoria-hall/>

Fig 6 - Non-Scottish Scots. (n.d.). Theimmeasurablewilds-sutherland.co.uk. Retrieved April 25, 2025, from <https://theimmeasurablewilds-sutherland.co.uk/452505938/451239763>

Fig 7 + 8 + 9 + 10 - Main Hall: More photos of the refurbished floor and seating to follow! —. (n.d.). Victoria Hall Events and Conferencing Sheffield. Retrieved April 25, 2025, from <https://www.victoriahallsheffield.org/rooms-and-facilities-gallery/main-hall>