

# Working Men's Mission Hall, Basingstoke, 1905 to 1928

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From its opening in February 1905 until its transfer to the Methodists in 1928, the Working Men's Mission Hall in George Street, Basingstoke, served as a non-denominational place of worship for those living in the vicinity (see Fig. 1).

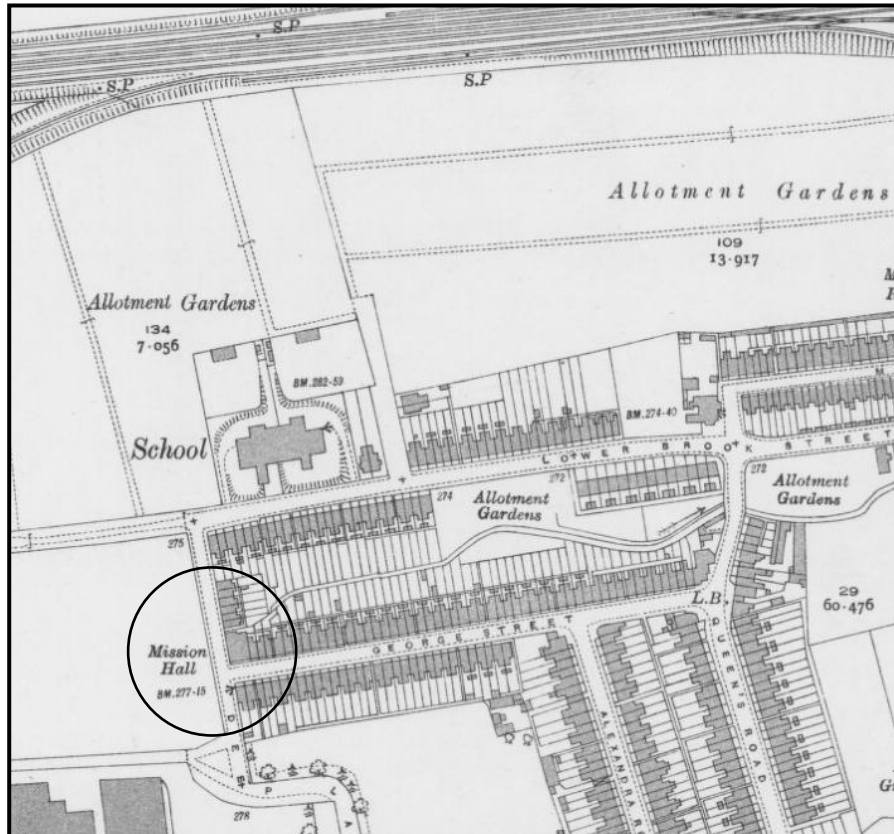


Fig. 1: Location of Working Men's Mission Hall as shown on an Ordnance Survey Map of 1909/10.

In words used at the opening ceremony, it was the 'earnest desire' of those behind the enterprise that 'souls might be saved there and that the preaching of the Gospel in that Hall might be made a means of blessing to the neighbourhood.'<sup>1</sup>

The Hall, including the site, cost £220. Erected by Messrs. Hedderley and Purdue, it was 'an iron building, capable of accommodating 250 persons.' It was described as being 'very comfortable and ... [presenting] a light and attractive appearance. The walls and roof ... [were] lined with matchboarding ... [and it was] fitted with incandescent gas lights.' There are at least two photographs of the Hall, one almost certainly from this early period (see Fig. 2), and the other from the 1960s/70s (see Fig. 3).

<sup>1</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 February 1905.



Fig. 2: A Pre-First World War Photograph showing the Hall in relation to the properties in George Street



Fig. 3: Mission Hall George Street in the 1960s

Since records relating specifically to the Hall have not been found, it is not entirely clear who were the moving spirits behind its construction and subsequent functioning. That said, a newspaper report indicates that a leading light in its early days was George Tarrant, a builder's labourer.<sup>2</sup> At the time of his death in 1913 a special service was held at the Hall in his memory. As reported:

<sup>2</sup> 1911 Census Return Ref: RG 110, ED 2, schedule 26, piece 6275.

... [he] was a very active member of the Mission, and at one time, previous to his leaving Basingstoke, with the late Mr Flux he took a very active part in it. On his return to the town he at once renewed his membership but owing to his indifferent health he had not been able to take the same active part as he did before. He was always ready to do whatever he could to help on the work, and he was held in the greatest esteem and respect by the members.<sup>3</sup>

The Hall also attracted a considerable amount of support from Nonconformists and well-wishers within Basingstoke and beyond. For example, it was formally opened by Mr B.B. Pond from Andover and William Buckland, Basingstoke's mayor, presided at the evening meeting. There were also contributions during the afternoon and evening from, amongst others, Mr Hathaway, 'Mr Sayers another friend from Andover, Mr E. Andrews, Mrs Richardson and the Treasurer, Mr A. Bartlett.' Interestingly, the latter felt the need to make clear that the 'Hall had not been erected in any spirit of opposition to any other Church.' Not surprisingly, perhaps, the mood at the Hall's opening was buoyant and optimistic. The formal proceedings and afternoon tea, as well as the evening meeting were all exceptionally well attended. By 1910 the debt on the Hall had been cleared.<sup>4</sup>

On Sunday 15th July 1906, the Mission held its first camp meeting. As the following extracts from the report of the meeting illustrate, this enabled the Mission to make its presence felt within the town:

The services commenced at 7.00 am with a prayer meeting, which was well attended. At 10.30 the friends met together at the end of Essex-road, near Ford's Buildings, and service was commenced with a hymn and a prayer. While Bro. Rowell was giving a short address, the Tadley Temperance Gospel Brass Band, who had volunteered their services for the day, arrived. A march was then made for the camp ground, along Brook-street and George-street, to a spare piece of land. Here an open-air service was held at 11.00 o'clock ... At 2 o'clock the band and friends met in the Market Place, where a short service was held, the playing and singing again being very hearty. Short invitations to all that were not going anywhere were given ... and the Company then marched down Church-street, Cross-street, Flaxfield, Worting-road and Alexandra-road to the camp ground, where another service was held ... At 5.40 a start was made from May Street, and a large procession was formed, the route taken being through May Street and Deep Lane. Invitations were given at intervals ... The addresses at the evening meeting were given by Bro. Bartlett and Bro. Murrell, and afterwards the meeting was thrown open for short testimonies and singing ... The band gave one or two short selections, and themselves sang a round of choruses which was excellently done. The Mission Choir also sang a splendid piece before the close ... [at] about 8.30.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly this was a very memorable, not to say exhausting, event in the life of the Mission.

It would seem from the press reports of anniversary celebrations in the years that followed the Hall thrived. For example, in its first year the number of Sunday school scholars increased from 40 to 115 and the number of teachers from 5 to 11.<sup>6</sup> By 1912 it had 140 scholars.<sup>7</sup> In 1913, since 'the work had continued to prosper in every way and the Hall had become too small for the accommodation of the children' new classrooms were added (see

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<sup>3</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 8 February 1913.

<sup>4</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 February 1910.

<sup>5</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 July 1906. There is also a detailed report of their camp meeting held in 1915, to which the Tadley Gospel Temperance Band made a significant contribution and 'greatly helped in the success of the event.' Most of the outdoor events were held in the Recreation Ground near the Mission Hall. *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 14 August 1915.

<sup>6</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 May 1906.

<sup>7</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 4 May 1912.

Fig 4). To celebrate the event special sermons were preached on a Sunday in November and on the following Monday they were formally opened by Mrs F.A. Wallis.<sup>8</sup>

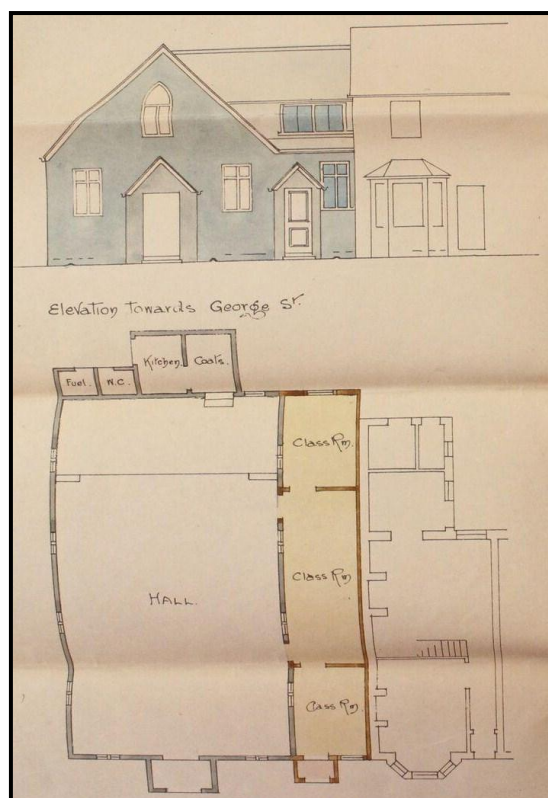


Fig. 4: Plans for the New Classrooms 1913 (Hampshire Record Office: 58M74/BP620).

In addition, the Hall sponsored a variety of other organisations including a branch of the Band of Hope and a Christian Endeavour Society;<sup>9</sup> a clothing club; and after a few years an orchestra. In addition, concerts and entertainments of various kinds were organised, including a performance by members of the Tadley Gospel Temperance Band and Choir in February 1913<sup>10</sup> and the Eastleigh Temperance Brass Band in January 1914.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Hall served as a social as well as a spiritual centre for the residents of the area in which it was located.

In keeping with the ecumenical spirit which underpinned the activities of the Mission, considerable assistance was received from local ministers, with guest preachers at anniversary celebrations having a variety of denominational backgrounds. In 1906, the Wesleyan Methodist minister, the Rev. Harold J. Chapman, gave a 'stirring address';<sup>12</sup> in 1908 the minister of Immanuel Church, the Rev. William Schofield Thomson, gave a 'most able speech' on the theme of "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a merchantman";<sup>13</sup> in 1910, the Rev. Frederick George West, 'the newly appointed Pastor of Sarum Hill Baptist Church', spoke;<sup>14</sup> and in 1911, the Wesleyan Methodist minister, the Rev. W.A. Chettle, gave 'a most

<sup>8</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 22 November 1913. The number of scholars was now 150.

<sup>9</sup> At the 1913 anniversary celebrations it was reported that the Band of Hope had a membership of 60 and Christian Endeavour 22. There was also a junior Christian Endeavour Society with 26 members. *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 March 1913.

<sup>10</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 22 February 1913.

<sup>11</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 31 January 1914.

<sup>12</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 February 1906.

<sup>13</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 February 1908.

<sup>14</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 February 1910.

inspiring and earnest address.<sup>15</sup> While Mr Humphrey Williams, the evangelist attached to London Street Congregational Church gave an 'excellent address' at the Hall's Sunday School anniversary celebrations in 1911;<sup>16</sup> at the 1913 Hall anniversary, 'a most excellent speech' was given by the Rev Walter Barnes, the Wesleyan Methodist minister;<sup>17</sup> and at the 1914 Hall anniversary the Rector of Eastrop, the Rev Edwin B. Brown 'gave an excellent speech'.<sup>18</sup>

The Mission continued to thrive throughout the First World War. In October 1914, there was a 12 Days' Gospel Mission led by Misses Clarke and Thrasher;<sup>19</sup> in 1915, 'very successful anniversary services were held';<sup>20</sup> and in 1916, there was a special afternoon service 'consisting of singing, recitations and a short address' to celebrate harvest, for which there was a 'good congregation'.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the outlook for the Mission seemed bright at the beginning of the inter-War years. For example, at celebrations to mark its fourteenth anniversary in 1919: 'The Secretary's report was very encouraging, also the Treasurer's report which showed a balance on the right side.' The Chairman, Mr S. Mogridge, preached at both services on the Sunday and gave 'a stirring address' at the Monday evening meeting.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1920s the format of anniversary celebrations remained very similar to that of earlier years. On the Sunday there were morning and evening services at 11.00 and 6.30 respectively. While in the afternoon at 3.00 there was a service or entertainment with the Primitive Methodist orchestra often taking the lead. On Monday a public tea was followed by an evening meeting or entertainment, with the Worting Congregational Church Choir making a contribution in 1922. However, although details of the programme were provided in "Forthcoming Events" column of the *Hants and Berks Gazette*, usually there were no detailed reports as there had been in earlier years. Given that anniversaries continued to be celebrated until 1928 it can only be assumed that they were reasonably well attended and that the efforts of the organisers met with some success. During this period, Sunday School anniversaries were also marked with special services, as well as harvest and other events.<sup>23</sup>

However, the Mission anniversary of 1928, its twenty-third, which included contributions from the Tadley Gospel Temperance Silver Prize Band and United Choir, proved to be the last.<sup>24</sup> A few weeks later it was announced that: 'The Trustees of the Working Men's Mission Hall in George Street, which ... [had] heretofore been carried on as an independent religious organisation, recently met and unanimously decided to offer the Mission Hall to the Wesleyan Methodist Church.'<sup>25</sup> Although no reasons were given in the report, it is possible that the decision had been prompted by the 'heavy losses sustained by the lamented deaths' of two key figures in the running of the Mission, Messrs Lane and Laney. At the 1928 anniversary they had been described as 'devoted and generous workers in the Mission'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 February 1911.

<sup>16</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 13 May 1911.

<sup>17</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 March 1913.

<sup>18</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 February 1914.

<sup>19</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 17 October 1914.

<sup>20</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 5 June 1915.

<sup>21</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 & 30 September 1916.

<sup>22</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 15 March 1919.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 May 1927 and 24 September 1927.

<sup>24</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 10 March 1928. 'On Monday evening the United Choir rendered a very successful musical service, the items giving great pleasure.'

<sup>25</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 31 March 1928.

<sup>26</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 10 March 1928.

## Postscript

Following its transfer, the building was shown in trade directories as the Methodist Mission Hall.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, in May 1928, the Hall hosted a sacred concert given by the Cliddesden Wesleyan Choir an indication, perhaps, of its changed denominational status. Writing in the 1960s a Methodist minister recorded that it had ‘been staffed by members of the Town Churches who ... [had] done excellent work through the years in ministering to what was regarded as a poor part of town.’<sup>28</sup> In 1963 the Hall was formally closed as a place of worship but for the next few years under a new trust it served as a youth centre for organisations of which the Boys Brigade was the major user. The Hall was demolished in the 1970s.

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<sup>27</sup> The new deed recording the change of ownership was dated 23 October 1928.

<sup>28</sup> Hampshire Record Office Ref: 57M77/NMS243. As has been pointed out, however, many of those living in the area were skilled workers.