

Faith and Fun: Free Church Sponsored Social Activities in Edwardian Basingstoke - 1903

Introduction

Although the primary concern of churches has always been the spiritual wellbeing of those in their catchment area, many have also contributed to the social life of the communities within which they are situated. In the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, this observation applied as much, if not more so, to the Free Churches as to the Church of England, notwithstanding the somewhat puritanical and killjoy reputations they had acquired due, in part, to their antipathy towards intoxicating liquor and gambling. As Jeffrey Cox points out, they provided 'entertainment for the general community more readily than the Anglicans.'¹ In the view of many Nonconformists there was no contradiction between their faith and having fun, within prescribed limits.

This short paper focuses on the social activities during a single year, 1903, which were sponsored by Basingstoke's four principal Free Churches at that time namely - London Street Congregational Church; the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Church Street; the Primitive Methodist Church on Sarum Hill, opened in 1902; and Immanuel (Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion) Church in Wote Street. For source material a heavy reliance has been placed on the *Hants and Berks Gazette* which faithfully reported, often in considerable detail, such activities. At the time, none of the churches appears to have had a magazine, or if they did, copies have not survived. What emerges is a rich array of activities, which were well supported by, one assumes, not only church members but also the wider population. Broadly there were three main types of activity which to some extent overlapped. These were entertainments and concerts; bazaars and sales of work; and Sunday school treats. There were also a couple of activities which do not fit neatly into one of these categories.

Entertainments and concerts

The best examples of this category were the Pleasant Saturday Evening (PSE) entertainments organised by London Street Congregational Church.² Held weekly between October and March, a flavour of what was on offer can be gained from this report of the PSE held on Saturday 14th November:

The programme at London Street Schoolroom last Saturday was arranged by Miss Dunn. There was again a crowded house. The programme was of such excellence that it is impossible to mention any one in particular, every item being much appreciated. The accompaniments were played by Mrs Ahrens, Miss Phillips and Miss G. Miller. The chair was taken Alderman T.J. Edney, JP. Programme:- Pianoforte solo, "Polish Dance," Miss G. Miller; song "The Pink Hungarian Band," Mr Phillips (encore "Yo ho! Little Girls"); violin solo, "Bolero," Dr Ahrens (encore "Violets"); song, "You are my darling," Mrs Ahrens; song, "Who'll buy my lavender," Mr Whittingham (encore "Mary"); pianoforte solo, "Polonaise de l'opera," Miss G. Miller (encore "Au pui temps"); song "The amorous goldfish," Miss Moody (encore "Four leaved clover"); song, "I can't think of nothing else but you," Mr Phillips (encored); violin solo, "Nocturne," Dr Ahrens (encore "Sylvia"); song, "Venetian song," Mr Whittingham (encore "Oft in the still night"); song, "The swallows," Mrs Ahrens

¹ Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society Lambeth*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982): 85.

² These dated from the beginning of the twentieth century and were an initiative associated with the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon (Men's Own Brotherhood) Movement, a branch of which was established by London Street Congregational Church in May 1899.

(encore “Violets”); “God save the King”. This evening [i.e. 21 November] a concert will be given by the Reading Excelsior Quartette Party.³

On the occasion reported above the entertainment was exclusively musical. On other evenings, however, musical items were often interspersed with ‘recitations and impersonations’.⁴

Apart from the PSEs, during the year a number of other entertainments received press coverage. On New Year’s Eve, the annual church social was held in the Wesleyan schoolroom, with ‘the party being agreeably entertained with musical selections and a recitation.’ This was followed by ‘the solemn watch-night service in the chapel.’⁵

On Thursday 19th February there was a ‘large attendance’ for an entertainment organised by London Street Christian Endeavour Society.⁶ ‘The programme was of a very varied character’ consisting of live music, recitations and gramophone selections. These were ‘attentively listened to and much appreciated by the audience.’⁷

On Monday 16th March ‘a concert given by members and friends of the Wesley Guild attracted a numerous audience, whose appreciation of the performances was shown by hearty applause and encores.’⁸ This was very similar in format to the previously mentioned PSE with songs performed by individuals, a quartette and the Guild choir, and instrumental items. Again full details were provided in the newspaper report. Later in the week, on Thursday 19th March, the Primitive Methodists held a band concert for which there was a ‘large attendance’. Organised ‘in aid of funds for the new church’ once again the programme was set out in the newspaper together with a detailed statement of the financial position of the church.

Later in the year, on Tuesday 19th May, the Bethesda Male Voice Choir paid a second visit to Basingstoke. This drew ‘a large attendance’ to the Drill Hall. Amongst those who arranged the visit were the Primitive Methodist minister, the Revd Joseph Beal, and George Gale, the headmaster of the Board School and a deacon of London Street Congregational Church. The performance was to raise funds to support the Penrhyn quarrymen, who had been ‘locked out’ following a strike, and their families.⁹

Lastly, on Monday 16th November, the Wesley Guild held another musical evening. This consisted of songs and pianoforte and other instrumental solos.¹⁰ During the proceedings the minister, the Revd Harold J. Chapman, ‘made a short speech directing the attention of the Guild’ to a forthcoming bazaar.

Bazaars and sales of work

While the main purpose of bazaars and sales of works was fund raising they also served as opportunities for social intercourse and recreation in its broadest sense. During 1903 there were two major events of this kind and a host of smaller ones. In early March the

³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 November 1903.

⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 February 1903.

⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 3 January 1903.

⁶ Although Christian Endeavour was primarily an organisation for young people, it attracted all ages to events of this kind.

⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 February 1903. The proceeds were devoted to the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon fund.

⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 March 1903. The Wesley Guild was the Wesleyan Methodist equivalent of Christian Endeavour.

⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 May 1903.

¹⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 November 1903.

Congregationalists held their Grand “Reformation Times” bazaar (see Figure 1) and in mid-June the Wesleyans their “Empire” bazaar.

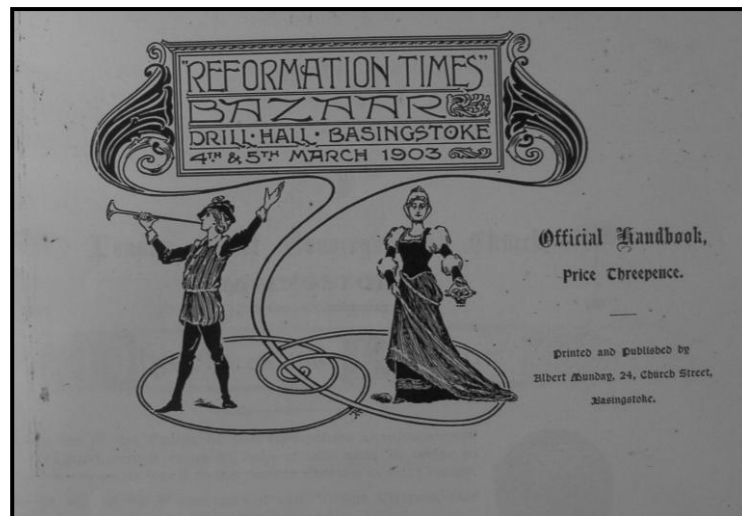


Figure 1: Cover of Programme for Reformation Times Bazaar

Both were held in the Drill Hall (see Figure 2). The Congregational bazaar was arranged ‘in aid of Funds of the Hants Congregational Union, the Renovation of the Village Chapels, and Evangelistic Work , etc,’¹¹ while that of the Wesleyans was for the purpose ‘of augmenting the building fund of the new church, which they propose[d] to erect on the site adjoining their present place of worship.’¹² In both cases, ‘bazaar decorators’ were employed to create the desired ambience, with a view to maximising attendance and, of course, takings.¹³



Figure 2: Basingstoke Drill Hall

Both bazaars incorporated a wide variety of attractions. For the Congregationalists these included the stallholders, primarily women, being attired in costumes ‘illustrative of various

¹¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 February 1903.

¹² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 June 1903.

¹³ The Congregationalists used the services of Messrs H.S. Kelly and Co. of Liverpool ‘the well-known bazaar decorators, who expressly painted the scenery to suit the requirements of the building and the occasion’ and the Wesleyans ‘Mr G.M. Bridges bazaar decorator of Kings Lynn ... [who produced] prettily painted and artistically fashioned scenery.’ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 February and 20 June 1903.

Periods and Countries of the Reformation' including John Calvin and Geneva, Martin Luther, the Pilgrim Fathers, John Knox and the Huguenots;¹⁴ music; *tableaux vivant*; conjuring; and competitions; as well as 'an art gallery, fairy well, fish pond, and a bandstand' (see Figure 3).¹⁵

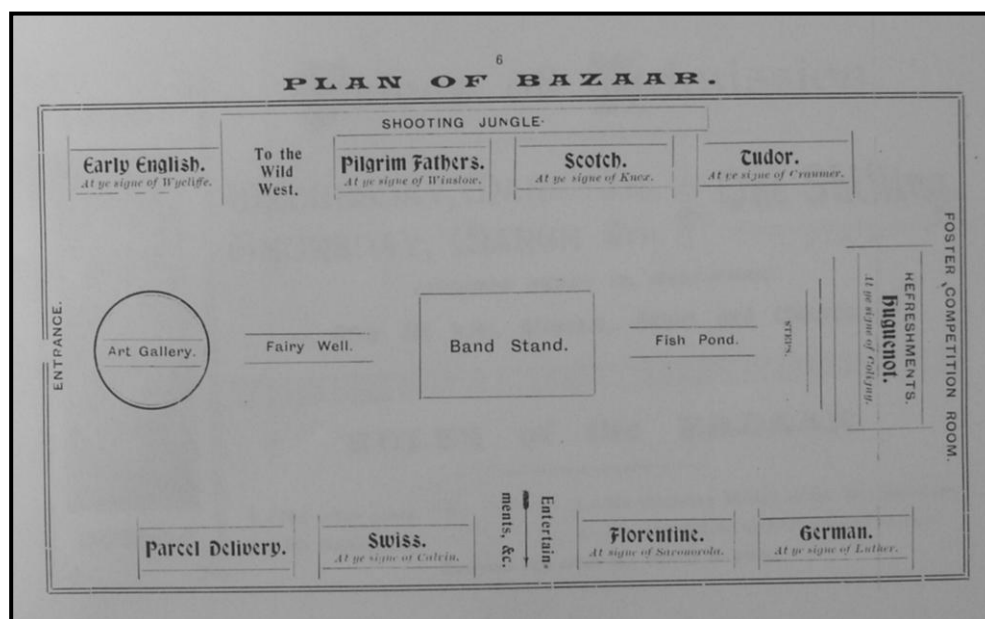


Figure 3: Extract from Reformation Times Bazaar Programme

As the *Hants and Berks Gazette* observed, 'It will readily be seen, therefore, that what with the attraction of the stalls and the varied entertainments, visitors to the bazaar had plenty of temptations to part with their money'.¹⁶ In this context, the use of the word 'temptation' might seem a little unfortunate! As the official programme made clear the rules of the bazaar embraced a number of clear moral principles, reflecting the influence of the Nonconformist conscience. There were to be '1. No unfair prices. 2. No Raffles. 3. No obtaining money under false pretences' and 4. No one was to be 'unduly bothered to buy'. Thus, as it was put, everyone could 'enjoy the bazaar in peace'.¹⁷

Presumably similar sentiments applied to the Wesleyan bazaar, where every effort was also made to create an impressive effect, as can be seen in the following comments:

The sentiments of patriotism and of pride in the vastness of the British Empire ... found expression in a very appropriate scheme of decoration, elegant and charming in its general effect ... Attractive scenes typical of the Colonies and the British Isles were placed above the various stalls. The best view of the Hall could be obtained from the platform and from this standpoint the Hall was a scene of gay magnificence. The coloured streamers and Chinese lanterns decorating the tie-rods of the roof; the attractively dressed stalls on either hand, and behind the band stand in the middle of the floor the brilliant flower stall with its bank of dark foliage and clusters of bloom surrounding a representation of an Indian pagoda – all combined to produce a charmingly light and graceful result; and when the hall became crowded the

¹⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 February 1903.

¹⁵ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 7 March 1903.

¹⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 March 1903.

¹⁷ "Reformation Times" Bazaar. *Official Handbook*, 7.

kaleidoscopic effect of the moving figures and bright dresses completed a brilliant and exceedingly interesting ensemble.¹⁸

Each of the stalls was representative of a particular part of the UK or British Empire. While, ‘at the back of the stage was a grand representation of Windsor Castle, with the River Thames in the foreground ... [standing] for a suggestion of England, the mother-land.’ Again there was a full programme of music and entertainments. A particular attraction on the first day was a ‘nail driving competition for ladies which attracted considerable amusement.’¹⁹ On the second there was ‘a hat trimming contest for gentleman.’²⁰

The net sum raised by the Congregational bazaar was £278, or nearly £24,000 in today’s terms, while the net proceeds of the Wesleyan bazaar were just under £222, or nearly £19,000 in today’s terms.²¹

The smaller scale fund raising events are summarised in the Table 1.

Table 1: Smaller Scale Fund Raising Events Organised by the Free Churches during 1903

Date	Organiser*	Form	Location	Takings
1 Jan	PM	Sale of Work	Schoolroom	£32 15s 4d
21/22 Jan	YHL	Bazaar and entertainment	Drill Hall	£40 approx
26 Nov	Imm	Sale of work	Schoolroom	£30+
26 Nov	WM	Bazaar	Schoolroom	£50
10 Dec	LSSS	Sale of work and cakes	Henry Jackson’s residence	£12

Key

PM = Primitive Methodists, to reduce the debt arising from the construction of their new church.

YHL = Young Helper’s League, in ‘support of a “Basingstoke Cot” ’ at the Stepney Causeway homes of Dr Barnardo.²²

Imm = Immanuel Church, ‘in aid of the scheme for the gradual renovation of the Church premises’.²³

WM = Wesleyan Methodists, ‘to raise funds for their proposed new church’.²⁴

LSSS = London Street Sunday School, ‘to clear off the balance of about £11 due to the Treasurer’.²⁵

The goal of the Wesleyans had been to raise £300 from their two bazaars. Although they fell a little short of this, their new church was built and opened in 1905.

Sunday school treats

During the summer months all the churches arranged outings and other forms of treat for their Sunday school scholars. The first two events of this kind, for Immanuel and Primitive Methodist scholars, were held on the afternoon of Thursday 16th July. Both were affected by bad weather. It was originally intended to use Goldings Park as the location for the Immanuel treat. Instead, after a tea in the schoolroom the scholars adjourned to the Corn Exchange, which they were able to use ‘due to the kindness of the mayor’, and where they thoroughly

¹⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 June 1903.

¹⁹ The first prize was won by Mrs Davis.

²⁰ Prizes were awarded to Mr E, Marshall, Mr W, Champion and Mr Burt.

²¹ The exact amount was £221 19s 10d. The UK inflation calculator has been used to determine the current value of the sums raised.

²² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 January 1903.

²³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 November 1903.

²⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 November 1903.

²⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 December 1903.

enjoyed ‘games and various competitions got up by the teachers.’²⁶ The Primitive Methodist scholars went to the ‘lovely grounds’ of Malshanger Park, the home of Sir Wyndham Portal, ‘for the first time in their history’. Here, they were joined by children from Oakley Primitive Methodist chapel. After tea in the ‘old pavilion ... the grass being short the young people ... [had] their usual games, and for the younger children there was the excitement of races.’²⁷

The following Thursday it was the turn of the Congregational and Wesleyan scholars. Frustratingly, however, the weather was even worse with ‘rain beginning in the afternoon and continuing without cessation all evening.’ On this occasion, Goldings Park was the venue for the Congregationalists. As reported, ‘most fortunately the little ones were able to enjoy their tea before the rain came to much, being sheltered by large trees in three groups, boys, girls and infants.’ Following their tea, the children went home with it being likely that ‘sports and amusements’ would be rearranged for the following week.²⁸ Whether or not this happened is not recorded. It was reported, however, that the Wesleyans postponed their sports until Thursday 6th August when, in the grounds of Foyle Lodge, ‘in lovely weather ... the usual games were enjoyed, and there were scrambles for sweets and buns.’²⁹

Other Activities

In addition to the activities considered above there were two others which do not readily fit into any of the main categories. One was Immanuel’s annual ‘strawberry tea’ held in the grounds of Downsland in early July.³⁰ As reported, this ‘proved to be a specially happy and successful event ... [and] after tea, the company enjoyed a season for games and social intercourse until eight o’clock,’³¹ after which there was a service in the Church.

A second activity was a social gathering organised by the Wesley Guild in October. ‘The proceedings ... began with a short programme of musical and other items, after which refreshments were dispensed, and the members then joined in social converse and various games.’³²

Conclusion

As these examples indicate, the Free Churches were extremely active in their provision of social activities. Although the motivation for many of them might appear ‘somewhat worldly’, with the emphasis on fund raising, the justification would have been that they were in a good cause. Moreover, the preparation for such events contributed to a sense of shared endeavour and solidarity amongst church members. They also provided churches with opportunities for communicating the Christian message to the wider community. It is noteworthy, for example, that at many of the bazaars, the opening ceremonies incorporated prayers and hymn singing. Thus, at the Wesleyan bazaar in November, the minister ‘read a portion of Scripture, ... the Primitive Methodist minister ... offered prayer, after which the hymn “God of Almighty Love” was sung.’³³

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²⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 July 1903.

²⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 July 1903.

²⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 July 1903.

²⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 8 August 1903. Foyle Lodge was the home of Thomas Burberry. Their original destination was Malshanger Park, as it had been for the Primitive Methodists.

³⁰ This was the home of Mr and Mrs J.C.P. Curtis, who were members of London Street Congregational Church.

³¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 4 July 1903.

³² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 17 October 1903.

³³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 November 1903.