

The Men's Own Brotherhood Movement in Basingstoke: 1899-1929

Introduction

In May 1899 the first Pleasant Sunday Afternoon (hereafter P.S.A.) Society meeting, initiated by London Street Congregational Church, was held in Basingstoke.¹ Also known as the Men's Own Brotherhood Movement, meetings were destined to become a prominent feature of Basingstoke's church life for the next 30 years. Although a number other Free Churches introduced something similar during the first decade of the twentieth century they were relatively short lived and it is with the London Street P.S.A. that this paper is primarily concerned.

Originating in the West Midlands, the P.S.A. Movement had been started in 1875 by John Blackham, a Sunday school teacher and deacon of the Ebenezer Congregational Church, West Bromwich. It quickly spread and societies were established in many parts of the country, including Hampshire. As expressed in a work published at the height of the Movement in 1912, 'the attempt ... [was] nothing less than to teach a "democratic religion" leading to a "practical Christianity" full of love and good works.'² Meetings were intended to be 'brief, bright and brotherly', thereby appealing, in particular, to working men who would not otherwise attend church services. Although societies were attached to Free Churches of all denominations, arguably there were certain features of the Movement that made it especially appealing to Congregationalists.³

In what follows a heavy reliance has been placed on material from the *Hants and Berks Gazette* and the records of London Street Congregational Church, in particular the church magazine which was re-launched in 1908. With respect to the newspaper, reporting was not consistent so the narrative which emerges is somewhat patchy.

Early Years: 1899-1908

Relatively few traces remain of the early months of London Street's P.S.A. Society. The Secretary's first annual report, however, which was presented at the annual meeting held in October 1900 and reported in considerable detail, provides some helpful insights into what had been happening. First, and most importantly, since May 1899 meetings had 'been held without a break for 73 Sundays'. At these, helpful and often eloquent addresses had been delivered by 'all kinds and conditions of men.' Meetings were on Sunday afternoon from 3.00 to 4.00 and in keeping with the philosophy of the Movement they were lively affairs with hymn singing and musical contributions in addition to the talks. Moreover, 'the 700 sittings at the church at that

¹ It is not known on which Sunday the P.S.A. was inaugurated, since there is no report in the *Hants and Berks Gazette* or any other source. There is, however, a report dating from 1895 of an earlier initiative when some who desired 'to get in touch with the large number of men who ... [were] unattached to any regular place of worship, inaugurated P.S.A. meetings at the Masonic Hall'. *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 March 1895. It would seem that this did not succeed.

² Frederick DeLand Leete, *Christian Brotherhoods* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1912), 272.

³ See Roger Ottewill, ' "Brief, bright and brotherly": Assessing the relationship between the Men's Own Brotherhood Movement and Congregationalism in Edwardian Hampshire', *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, forthcoming.

time were almost filled.’⁴ Second, a benevolent fund had been set up ‘from which assistance would be given to brothers in need.’ Third, although the Movement was not a temperance one, a P.S.A. Pledge Book had been opened as ‘a helping hand ... to any brother who desired for his own or others’ sake to join the temperance army.’⁵

Another feature, which was not specifically mentioned, was the half yearly book distribution. Members subscribed one penny a week for six months. Of the 78 books purchased for the first distribution in December 1899:

The selection was varied and interesting and comprised no less than twenty-six different books. It was pleasant to note that the Bible headed the list, twelve being asked for. Next came the Windsor Magazine (9), Life of Gladstone (8), Tennyson, Kingsley, Livingstone, etc-⁶

At the second distribution in June 1900, the mayor commented that ‘while he saw before him a literary feast, which could not but give pleasure to those participating in it, he was glad to see that one book [i.e. The Bible] was well represented’.⁷ Reading of sound literature, both religious and secular, was encouraged as a wholesome pursuit.

In July 1900 there had been ‘a pleasant picnic’ at Malshanger Park which 180 members attended. ‘After tea a photograph of the P.S.A. members was taken and the evening was devoted to strolling through the beautiful gardens and grounds ... [while] the more vigorous members engaged in a cricket match with an eleven of the Early Closing Association.’⁸

Looking back at the early years of the P.S.A., from the perspective of January 1908, the following account was published in London Street’s re-launched church magazine:

Nine years ago when our little town was placarded with these significant letters [P.S.A.], almost to the length of goalposts, everybody was asking what it all meant. To-day everybody knows they stand for very much more than they did 8 or 9 years ago. So many men have knocked up against the P.S.A., become members, joining Sunday by Sunday in the peculiarly pleasant masculine singing, and listening to the telling addresses given. Hundreds of men have come and gone, others remain, many would testify to the value and help the P.S.A. has been and is to them. The writer knows of many men who have been toned into a better mode of living – in their homes and in their work; others who have been brought into new spheres of work in connection with their Church, to which many of them were almost, if not altogether,

⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 October 1929.

⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 October 1900.

⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 December 1899. *The Windsor Magazine* was produced by Ward Lock and Co and first published in 1895. It was described as ‘An Illustrated Monthly for Men and Women’. Not surprisingly, an illustration of Windsor Castle was on the cover.

⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 June 1900.

⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 July 1900. The cricket match was won easily by the Early Closing Association team.

strangers. And better still, some, through attending the P.S.A. have been brought into contact with their Lord and Master and Redeemer.⁹

Thus, it would seem that London Street P.S.A. quickly established itself.

Notwithstanding the phrase ‘men’s own’, women were by no means excluded from the activities of the Brotherhood. Although meetings were intended primarily for men, from time to time women were invited to attend, as elsewhere. Known as ‘open meetings’, they proved to be very popular. For example, at an ‘open meeting’ in November 1902, the P.S.A. President, London Street’s minister the Revd Capes Tarbolton, ‘gave a right hearty welcome to the large number of ladies in attendance’. He went on to remark:

... that it was not selfishness in any of them that closed the doors against them at their ordinary meetings, and they thought it right as well as wise to let the ladies see the character and tone of their meetings. The meetings were such that they desired them to know what was done there and the means as well as the ways that were adopted to bring men within the hearing of the Gospel message.¹⁰

In other words, women were seen as a recruiting aid in encouraging the men in the lives - husbands, sons and brothers - to attend P.S.A. meetings. Apart from assisting with recruitment and one must assume retention, women were also involved through musical contributions and occasionally giving talks.¹¹

Although London Street P.S.A. made good progress during the first decade of its existence, it did face a number of challenges. At the annual meeting in 1906 it was reported that three similar societies had opened in the town and although ‘the numbers had not diminished so much as was feared’, London Street’s P.S.A. undoubtedly faced some competition.¹² That said, on a positive note, ‘there was no reason why they should be downhearted, but more cause for making united, enthusiastic and strenuous effort, so that ... [London Street] should be premier not only in point of age but also in point of attendance and success.’¹³ In other words, members should be pleased that London Street’s lead was being emulated by other churches.

A second challenge concerned the singing at meetings. While the speakers had been of ‘the usual high quality and variety ... the singing, solos, etc., had not been all that they would like them to be.’ In order to improve matters ‘it was proposed to try and revive interest in the male choir.’ This appears to have been successful since at the ninth anniversary of the P.S.A. celebrated on Sunday 24 May 1908, one feature was ‘special pieces [performed] by the male choir.’¹⁴ While in March 1909 at a religious

⁹ *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine* (hereafter BCM), Vol 1 (1), New Series (January 1908), unpaginated.

¹⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 15 November 1902.

¹¹ For example, at the meeting on 1 March 1908, Miss Mabel Prince sang the sole “There is a green hill far away”. BCM vol 1 (4). While on 27 Sept 1908, ‘Miss May Harmsworth and Miss Grace Dolding rendered a duet in the very best style.’ BCM Vol 1(10).

¹² The new societies were not specifically identified but it is assumed that they were sponsored by the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist churches and Immanuel Church.

¹³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 10 November 1906.

¹⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 May 1908.

service held on a Sunday evening at the Empire Theatre, the ‘ “Men’s Own Choir” from the P.S.A., London-street with their usual willingness led the singing and contributed several anthems.’¹⁵

Thus, London Street’s P.S.A ended its first decade in good heart. Although membership had declined a little since a high point of around 300 in 1905 this was partly due to the competition from similar societies. In so far as ‘imitation is the sincerest form of flattery’, London Street’s P.S.A. could be said to have been a ‘victim of its own success.’ It clearly met a need and by blending geniality with seriousness it undoubtedly appealed to many males who might otherwise have been completely lost to the churches.

Middle Years: 1909-1919

The next ten years covered the First World War, which could be said to have undermined the very foundations of the P.S.A. However, it survived to celebrate its 20th anniversary in 1919.

At the P.S.A.’s 13th annual meeting held in November 1912 it was reported that the membership stood at about 150 and 44 new members had been enrolled during the year. ‘One hundred members were paying into the book fund, the Coal Club numbered 63 members, and the Slate Club 388.’¹⁶ Although numbers were substantially lower than had previously been the case, the P.S.A. still appears to have been meeting a very real need.

By now open air meetings or ‘demonstrations’ had become a regular feature of P.S.A activities. These attracted ‘very large’ crowds and served to demonstrate the appeal of Brotherhood gatherings. Thus, they can be seen as a form of outreach. One such meeting was held in the summer of 1913 when the speaker was ‘Lieut. A.E. Sanders R.N. whose subject was “Christianity the Light of the World.”’¹⁷

To give a flavour of what was on offer at this time, the following is an extract from a report of a meeting held in June 1914 on the eve of the First World War:

The P.S.A. Brotherhood ... intended to hold an open-air meeting in the Wheatsheaf paddock on Sunday afternoon, but the atmospheric conditions not being genial, it was decided to hold the gathering in the Drill Hall. There was a large attendance, principally of men. The Town Band ... played selections and accompanied the singing of hymns, and their services were highly appreciated. The Rev R. Mackintosh [London Street’s minister] presided, and an excellent address was given by Mr. William Heal of Harrow, hitherto a stranger to the Basingstoke Brotherhood, but the president evidently carried the meeting with him when he expressed the hope that Mr. Heal would come again.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 27 March 1909.

¹⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 30 November 1912.

¹⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 5 July 1913.

¹⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 13 June 1914.

Not surprisingly, during the War years soldiers were made especially welcome at meetings, such as one in February 1915 addressed by 'Mr Charles Lidington (London's Popular Elocutionist) who ... gave a recital address on "the greatest thing in the World"'.¹⁹

In October 1915 the Basingstoke Brotherhood hosted 'the quarterly meeting of the Berks, Bucks, Oxon and North Hants Federation of P.S.A., Brotherhood and Kindred Societies' at London Street Congregational Church. At a public meeting in the evening, 'Mr W.W. Mann, The Continental Relief Secretary to the National Brotherhood Council spoke with remarkable animation on "The Coming Opportunity". He contrasted the world as it was with what it would have been had the ideals of the brotherhood been realised.'²⁰

On National Brotherhood Sunday in 1916, the speaker was the mayor of Peterborough.²¹ Later in that year at an 'open meeting' everyone who attended was invited to bring an egg with 171 being collected. These were divided between West Ham Military Hospital and Basingstoke Cottage Hospital.

Towards the end of the War, at a meeting in June 1918, the speaker was the Revd. Tom Sykes, a Primitive Methodist, who was serving as National Secretary of the Brotherhood Movement. The title of his talk was "Brotherhood and the present crisis". There was also a contribution from Mrs Mackney who sang "Thanksgiving".²²

Thus, meetings were held on a regular basis throughout the War years and provided a degree of solace in those troubled times. They also enabled members to reflect upon their hopes and fears for the Post-war era.

Later Years: 1920-1929

With the War over, Basingstoke Brotherhood members continued to meet Sunday by Sunday for another ten years. As usual, the annual business meeting and social was held in the autumn of 1920. 'A new departure in the election of officers was the appointment of a Lay President (Mr Munday) in addition to the Pastor President (Rev. Roccliffe Mackintosh).' Later one of the members presented a paper 'on "How to make the Brotherhood a success," dealing with its attitude on four points, viz., religious service, the drink traffic, public welfare, and politics.' The paper provided a succinct summary of the priorities of the Movement at this point in its history.²³ During the year there had been addresses by some powerful speakers. One on Brotherhood Sunday was John Stuart 'a man of wide literary, political and social experience'²⁴ and another was Lieut. Ernest Brown, M.C., who spoke of 'the necessity of getting back to the principles of the "old Book" in our conduct and so hasten the coming of the Golden Age in which the spiritual will be supreme.'²⁵

¹⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 13 February 1915.

²⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 9 October 1915.

²¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 March 1916.

²² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 8 June 1918.

²³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 October 1920.

²⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 13 March 1920. Recently, John Stuart had addressed a large society in Chelmsford for the 44th time.

²⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 3 July 1920. At this meeting £4 10s was raised in aid of the Hampshire Fund of the Crippled Children's Hospital in Alton.

A little later, at the annual meeting held in December 1920 it was mentioned that the membership stood at 120 in its 21st anniversary year. The speaker on this occasion was the Rev. Canon Bickersteth from Ottery and his topic was the League of Nations.²⁶

Over the next few years the Basingstoke Brotherhood demonstrated its ability to attract a wide and diverse range of speakers. Some examples are provided in Table 1, together with the title of their talks. To an extent, these reflect the Brotherhood's increasing concern with socio-political issues.

Table 1: Speakers at Brotherhood Meetings

Date	Speaker	Topic
27 Feb 1921	Tom Cape MP	"Social Reconstruction"
8 Jan 1922	Fred O. Roberts MP	"The Dawn of Democracy"
19 Mar 1922	Capt W.G. Hall	Clothes. 'Are the people better clothed mentally and spiritually?'
15 Oct 1922	Spencer Portal JP	"Children and the Brotherhood Spirit"
7 Sept 1924	F. Williams	"Practical Brotherhood"
8 Nov 1925	Rev J.W. Tuffley ¹	"The Forgotten Manhood"
19 Sept 1926	Rev R. E. Brown	"The Reformation"
16 Oct 1927	Harry Bull ²	"Criminology"

Note

1. Tuffley was Secretary of the National Brotherhood Movement. He spoke at the 26th anniversary of the London Street Society.
2. Bull was a Winchester Police Court Missioner.

Sources: *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 March 1921, 14 January 1922, 25 March 1922, 21 October 1922, 13 September 1924, 14 November 1925, 18 September 1926, 15 October 1927.

London Street's minister, the Revd Roccliffe Mackintosh, also spoke on a number of occasions. For example, on Peace Sunday 1924 the intriguing title of his talk was "Peace and - Opium", in which particular reference was made to a recent International Conference at which 'the curtailment of the sale and distribution of opium was discussed'. At the end of the meeting a motion was passed deploring the British Government's action 'in refraining from voting for curtailment in the cultivation and distribution of opium'.²⁷ Such action was further evidence of the Brotherhood's willingness to take a stance on political issues.

In addition to its Sunday meetings, the Brotherhood continued to be mindful of the need to demonstrate its altruism and what was characterised as 'practical Brotherhood'. To this end, in 1925 it organised 'a social for the blind and their guides and jointly with the Women's Own of London Street Church a concert for 30 old

²⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 December 1920.

²⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 27 December 1924.

folk'.²⁸ While at the Armistice Day service in 1928 the collection was in aid of 'Alton Cripple's Hospital'.²⁹

Another venture was a Brotherhood Concert held in 1926.

A sacred concert arranged by the Brotherhood Male Voice Choir .. [attracted] an exceptionally large audience ... and the collection which was in aid of Brotherhood funds, amounted to about £7. The programme was excellently rendered and greatly appreciated.³⁰

Members also went on outings. For example, in 1925:

A very enjoyable outing ... took place on Thursday in last week. The party numbering about 30, journeyed via Maidenhead and Slough to Windsor, where a visit to the state apartments at Windsor Castle was much enjoyed. Tea was provided by friends at the Baptist Church Slough. The return journey was made through Virginia Water, where a short stay to enjoy the lovely scenery was much appreciated. Perfect weather ensured the complete success of the undertaking.³¹

Throughout the 1920s, the London Street Society maintained links with kindred societies through its membership of the Thames Valley Federation. Consisting of 13 societies, in 1922 the Federation held its annual meeting in Basingstoke. Interestingly, by this stage the President of the Federation was Mrs Drake of Reading, thereby demonstrating that gender demarcation had been significantly eroded.³²

Conclusion

In October 1929 it was announced that the Brotherhood was to 'close down.'³³ The decision had been taken at what was to be the final meeting of members. This had been held at London Street Congregational Church on Friday 4 October. By a small majority it was resolved that meetings be 'discontinued forthwith'. It is not entirely clear what prompted this decision. In all probability it was declining numbers and a feeling that the Society had outlived its usefulness. That said, the winding up of London Street's Brotherhood did not mark the end of the Movement in Basingstoke, since in 1933 a branch of the Post-War Brotherhood was established in the town.³⁴ This will be the subject of a follow up paper.

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June 2018

²⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 31 January 1925.

²⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 10 November 1928.

³⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 October 1926.

³¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 11 July 1925.

³² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 11 February 1922. Other member societies included Reading, Caversham, Maidenhead and Newbury.

³³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 October 1929.

³⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 April 1933.