OLD WEST BROMWICH Nineteenth Article 23.07.1943 W.E.Jephcott

John Skidmore, the “Middle Lock Preacher”

From Pit Boy to Evangelist

Most of the older generation of West Bromwich people have personal remembrance of John Skidmore, the Middle Lock preacher, and many of the younger residents will have heard about him from their fathers or mothers. He was one of the most striking personalities in the town some sixty or more years ago and an evangelist whose fame was spread far and wide throughout the Midlands. A reference to him in one of my earlier articles aroused such a considerable amount of interest that I feel sure the story of his remarkable life will be well worth re-telling. It is only 44 years since he passed away at the ripe old age of 82, but he was a link with the Black Country which in his day was far more deserving of the adjective “black” in a moral as well as a physical sense than it is today.

John Skidmore was born in Summer Lane, Tipton, on February 1st, 1817. Though of humble circumstances, his father, Thomas Skidmore, was a Wesleyan class leader, as befitted one who could claim lineal descent from John and Sarah Sheldon, two famous figures in the history of Midlands Methodism. John Sheldon lived at Crab’s farm and mill, Hill Top, which was situate on the high ground on the right-hand side as one descends Holloway Bank. It was exactly opposite the end of Hawkins Street and overlooked the huge hollow formed by mining operations where John Wesley frequently preached to thousands of people assembled in what was then a great natural amphitheatre. The farm buildings have disappeared but the hollow can still be seen, though not so large or deep as it was in Wesley’s days. John Sheldon was a zealous Methodist whose house was broken into and ransacked during the riots of 1743-44. The story of those happenings forms one of the most dramatic episodes in the life of John Wesley and is, I imagine, too well known to need more than this passing reference. It is told in detail in Hackwood’s History of West Bromwich and in a very well written booklet by Dr. E.A. Dingley, of Wednesbury, published a few years ago under the title of “Footsteps of John Wesley in Wednesbury”.

With such forbears it is not to be wondered at that as a boy John Skidmore manifested a desire to be a preacher of the Gospel. It is told of him that after a missionary meeting at Gospel Oak Wesleyan Chapel which he used to attend, at which the claims of the heathen were eloquently set forth, young John started to walk to Dudley the next morning. His object was to buy writing materials so that he could begin to prepare for missionary work and he expressed his fear lest all the heathen should be converted before he had time to take part in the work.

STARTED WORK AT EIGHT

All the schooling he had was probably in the Gospel Oak Sunday school, for at the age of eight John commenced work in a local coal pit. That sounds very terrible in these days, but it was regarded as quite the normal procedure in 1826, when child labour was common in all the industries of the Black Country as well as in the country generally. A considerable period elapsed before the employment of children at such an age was prohibited and as late as 1867 a Factory Act was passed which merely required that children between 11 and 12 years of age should be employed only half-time so that they could attend school the other half. Even this law was continually being broken, both by parents and employers, as the police court records of that time disclose. After a few years John Skidmore left the pits to take up the more remunerative occupation of a puddler in the ironworks and he continued to follow this employment until after his marriage.

In the meantime he endeavoured to make up for his lack of early education by home study, his ambition being to qualify for a local preacher and it is said he preached his first sermon at the age of 18. When he was 20 his note of trial which was a preliminary to what is known among Wesleyans as a Society ticket, constituting enrolment as a local preacher, was given to him by the Rev. John Hicklin, then superintendent of the Wednesbury circuit. John Hicklin had been sent out on his ministerial career by John Wesley himself and in presenting the ticket to John Skidmore he placed his hands upon his head and said “What John Wesley said to me I say to thee, Jackie – ‘be faithful’”.

MISSIONARY TO BOAT PEOPLE

At the ae of 21 John Skidmore began to officiate as a local preacher in the Wednesbury circuit. He had a natural gift of eloquence and this, with his transparent earnestness, soon gained him a local reputation. He also became a class leader like his father had been and after he took up his residence in West Bromwich he became associated with High Street Wesley. It was through the instrumentality of Mr. Thomas Bagnall that he became a wholetime evangelist. Mr. Bagnall, who was for some years one of the Commissioners for West Bromwich, was head of the noted firm of ironmasters who had furnaces and works at Golds Hill A generous philanthropist, an ardent Wesleyan, and keenly concerned about the moral and social welfare of the working classes, he was genuinely disturbed by the deplorable conditions which then existed, particularly among the canal boat people. These lived on their boats and because of their constant movement from place to place, the ordinary religious agencies were unable to reach them. Mr. Bagnall, in conjunction with Lord Calthorpe of Perry Hall, Perry Barr, who as one of the county magistrates sat at West Bromwich, engaged the young local preacher as a home missionary to boat people. John Skidmore applied himself to this congenial work with his usual zeal and devotion and soon his name became a household word in the Black Country.

It was, however, under the title of the “Middle Lock Preacher” that he gained his greatest fame. How he came to institute these Sunday morning services purely by chance, how they developed into one of the greatest evangelical movements ever carried on in this district, attracting thousands to every service from miles around and how John Skidmore carried his crusade into courts and alleys with his mission slogan “Hi. Hi. Shall I see you at the Middle Lock next Sunday” must remain to be told next week………………