OLD WEST BROMWICH Twentieth Article 30.07.1943 W.E.Jephcott

Inception of the Middle Lock Services

AN UNORTHODOX EVANGELIST

Midway between Spon Lane and Bromford Lane, what is known as the Middle Lock, serves to connect the two canals which at different levels converge there. In appearance the surrounding district has altered very little in the past century though the spoil banks which are now clothed with a sparse covering of vegetation, were then black and raw for some of the numerous colliers in the area were still working. One Sunday morning in May, 82 years ago, John Skidmore the young evangelist who had recently commenced missionary work among the canal boat people of West Bromwich, was distributing tracts in Spon Lane and in his walk came to the Middle Lock. There he found himself in the midst of a considerable gathering of typical colliers and ironworkers. Groups were engaged in dog-fighting, whippet racing, cock- fighting and gambling, and because the open character of the district enabled the approach of police or suspicious strangers to be quickly detected, they carried on their debasing “sports” almost with impunity.

John Skidmore was greatly pained by the scene and instead of inviting the men to come to a service in a recognised place of worship, he there and then boldly announced that on the following Sunday morning he should hold a service and preach at that very spot. He was as good as his word. Thus began the famous Middle Lock services which he carried on for 29 years. They began each year on the second Sunday in May and terminated at the end of August, thus covering the whole of the summer. Rapidly they grew in popularity. The attendances ranged from two or three thousand up to as many as 20,000. People came from a wide radius. Some were known to walk from as far as Stourbridge but in those days a walk of ten miles was regarded as an everyday thing. Many colliers regularly covered that distance in going to and from work. Men came to the services straight from the pits and the ironworks without changing their clothes.

ORDERED TO QUIT

In the second year of the services an incident occurred which might have brought them to an abrupt conclusion. Here is the story as told in John Skidmore’s diary; Sunday July 13th, 1862. This morning being very fine, I had the largest congregation I have addressed in my life. Such a sight I never saw before. Thousands worshipped God in the open air. It was a vast multitude of rich and poor, old and young, well-dressed and ragged, drapers, grocers, butchers, tailors, publicans, beer sellers, ironmasters, clerks, magistrates, puddlers, coalmasters, mine agents, “butties”, “doggies”, colliers, navvies, boatmen, roadmen, labourers, sweeps, a goodly number of Frenchmen from the Glass House, the aged and the infirm, the lame and the blind, men of all creeds and of no creed at all.

A great glorious sight, but all was not joyful.

“While singing the first hymn a man came to the platform on which I stood and gave me orders to quit the ground as I was doing damage, he paying rent to the canal company for the spoil bank. I gave out some verses of the hymn and while it was being sung the following conversation took place between the farmer and myself:-

I had meetings on this ground all through last summer and this is the ninth meeting this summer and yet nothing has been said to me about damage before.

*The Farmer: “Well, I pay for the bank and you are doing me damage”.*

“I am very sorry for it and if you will be kind enough to make out your bill for the injury done I will pay for it. You must please give me your name as I must tell the congregation who you are what you say.”

*The Farmer: “Thomas -------is my name*

“Indeed. What, William --------‘s brother? I know your brother very well. I have known him for many years – a very respectable man. He would not do what you are doing now and for the sake of the family I will withhold your name. I should be sorry for this large congregation to know that anyone of your name should stoop as low and be so wicked as to try and put a stop to these services.”

I then turned to give out the next verse and the farmer said, *“Go on with the meeting”* hung down his head and walked away utterly ashamed of what he had done.

PRACTICAL SYMPATHY

At the close of the service I told the congregation that I was ordered to hold no more meetings on the ground. Such a murmur of disapprobation I think I never heard. Scores, perhaps hundreds, with tears running down their faces, said “What a pity, What a shame”. I went on to say that I had told the man to make out a bill of the damage he considered these meetings had done and it should be paid. Scarcely were the words spoken when a gentlemen, Mr. Israel Parkes, Ironmaster, lifted his voice and said, “Here is £5 towards it”. This was followed by a shout of applause. I said, “There are others on the ground who are willing and able to follow your example if need be – (Hear, hear!) and “We’ll pay for it – we’ll buy it out and out” (referring to the ground). I gave out the hymn.

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow, and a converted navvy engaged in prayer, not forgetting the farmer, the gentleman who had offered £5 and the preacher”.

Henceforward the services continued without interruption until 1890 when they had to cease owing to the Canal Company making alterations to the land which rendered it unsuitable for use for the purpose. Their termination greatly distressed the veteran preacher. How great an influence they were for good can never be truly estimated, but there is no doubt that they created a deep and lasting impression upon thousands.

Mr. Israel Parkes, mentioned in the diary extract, and his son-in-law Alderman Charles Akrill, twice Mayor of West Bromwich, and by whose munificence the Akrill Nursing Home and the Akrill Almshouses were founded, were among John Skidmore’s staunchest friends. For more than 50 years he was a class leader at Wesley.

UNORTHODOX METHODS

Much of the success of the services was due to the personality of the preacher and his unorthodox methods. He had a gift of oratory and at times would set his audience roaring with laughter at some of his humorous remarks. A few minutes later they would be moved to tears by some touching appeal or illustration. “He found his way to the hearts of the roughest of men and those who had no respect for religion, respected John Skidmore”, was a contemporary tribute. On one occasion he was invited to pay a visit to America, one of his wealthy admirers offering to defray all his expenses, but John said he would never leave old England.

His methods of making known his mission were as unorthodox as his preaching. He was very partial to wearing a straw hat and every day in the week his familiar figure was to be seen in the streets, courts and alleys distributing the details of his meetings and calling out his slogan “Hi, hi: Shall I see you at the Middle Lock on Sunday?” He invaded public houses to put up his bills

**Next few lines not legible so omitted from this text. To be revised later.**

ASSEMBLED AT THE FOUNTAIN

When the services were at the height of their popularity John and his band of followers would assemble at the fountain which then stood in Dartmouth Square, singing their rallying hymn, Let Us Gather at the Fountain, and form a procession to the Middle Lock, headed by Brettel’s Band, which was associated with Brettel’s foundry in Spon Lane. On the way occasional halts would be made and Fred Higgins, an ex-prize fighter, would invite his bearers to accompany them in what was described as “his true-hearted but amusing manner”. John delivered his addresses from a portable pulpit but in his later years failing strength compelled him to let others conduct the devotional part of the service. The emotional strain told on the old man who was then over 70 years of age. His son, John Skidmore jnr. also a local preacher, was his chief assistant. Old John also officiated in many Wesleyan Chapels and his last sermon was preached at Beeches Road in 1895.

The great esteem in which he was held was marked by a public presentation in the Town Hall in 1873 of an illuminated address and £230 subscribed by all classes of the community in recognition of his long and devoted labours. Reuben Farley was chairman of the committee which organised it. As a mark of appreciation of his ministrations to the inmates of the Workhouse, the members of the Board of Guardians contributed to make him a presentation in 1876.

For 39 years John Skidmore was chaplain to the Nonconformist side at the West Bromwich Cemetery and for a long period he had charge of the local distribution centre in High Street of the Bible and Tract Society. He died at his home in Tildasley Street on Saturday January 28th, 1899. His wife pre-deceased him about two years and it was a coincidence that both lay dead in the house on their birthday.

An impressive public tribute was paid to him at his funeral, the blinds being drawn at all the windows en route to the cemetery where he was interred after a service at Wesley. A large and representative gathering of citizens joined the funeral cortege, expressive of the regard and esteem in which West Bromwich held one of its worthiest men.