

“A PLACE MUCH IN NEED OF A SPECIAL EFFORT”: A SCOTTISH EVANGELIST IN AYLESBURY, 1876-77

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The nineteenth century origins of many independent chapels remain obscure. This article describes the methods of evangelism, the local support and opposition, and the role of John Taylor and the Bucks Evangelistic Mission in the founding (1877) of the Assembly Hall, Aylesbury, with passing reference to other chapels in Buckinghamshire and elsewhere.

The nineteenth century saw the building of many of the nonconformist chapels which still dot our towns and villages. Often little is known about those who founded them. This is true even of major denominations but it is true to a marked degree of independent chapels and missions. In a few cases enough references survive to give a glimpse of a mission at work. An example is the case of John Elphinstone Taylor (c. 1843-1912) of the Bucks Evangelistic Mission who was instrumental in the founding of a dozen chapels in Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Middlesex. Of this dozen the founding of the Assembly Hall in Granville Street, Aylesbury, in 1877 attracted considerable local publicity.

Taylor's origins and early life remain obscure but he was probably a Scotsman who had moved to London. He was certainly active in Buckinghamshire from 1875 when we hear of him in Chesham.¹ By the time he made his will in 1882 he was living in Mobwell House, Great Missenden,² from where he removed to Honor Oak about 1900.³ In later life he was described as a retired farmer and of independent means. To judge from his reported comments and surviving chapel trust deeds he adhered to what may be called independent baptist principles.⁴ He was the leading light of the Bucks Evangelistic Mission and sent regular reports to the weekly *Word and Work* (in print 1875-98), edited by Charles Russell

Hurditch. Its inaugural editorial in 1875 stated that

“Its pages will be closed to all ecclesiastical questions and controversial subjects where foundation truth is not concerned; but open to the pen of every accredited minister of the gospel of Christ, when used with a view to the spiritual advancement of the people of God, without respect of denominational distinction”.⁵

Thus, this publication with which Taylor was associated was not restricted to one denomination but sought to support evangelists working in various churches. However, it does appear that many of the reports appearing in it were from what might broadly be called the Brethren movement.⁶

In the summer of the same year Taylor reported of some tent meetings that “large numbers of people are attracted to the services who habitually neglect both church and chapel. In some parts, the agricultural labourers have come from the hayfield and have listened with the deepest attention to the address”.⁷ Again, on the 2nd December he stated:

“We have had fine meetings in Chalfont St. Giles and Chalfont St. Peter, large numbers of people and mostly those who do not go to hear the gospel. I have it much on my heart to *seek out* all the needy places, towns and villages, and to hold a

week or more of special services as the Lord may guide. All the places I have yet been able to take up, the Lord has given much blessing. On Monday we held a meeting at Beaconsfield; every other night this week we have special meetings in the Town Hall, High Wycombe,⁸ to reach great numbers of men who hitherto have not been induced to attend a place where the gospel is preached. We have also a daily noon prayer-meeting. I am also making arrangements for a week of meetings in the town of Aylesbury, a place much in need of a special effort of this kind. The Corn Exchange there can be hired; it is a fine building, holding a thousand people. . . . I propose to commence there about December 12th.”⁹

Despite severe weather the meetings in High Wycombe had been crowded, with hundreds unable to get in. Taylor commented that the unity among the local ministers had been cheering.¹⁰ Meetings began in Aylesbury and the identity of some supporting ministers became evident from a cautious article in the *Bucks Herald* of 8th January 1876:

“During the week a series of what are designated ‘Evangelistic Services’ have been held, chiefly in the Corn Exchange,¹¹ which have attracted on all occasions large and attentive audiences. These resemble in their general features those which became so popular in the Metropolis and other large cities, in connection with Messrs. Moody and Sankey, whose spirited and stirring hymns formed no inconsiderable portion of them. The principal speakers were two London evangelists, Mr. J. E. Taylor and Mr. William Grove, otherwise ‘Happy Bill’, whose vigorous denunciations of sin and appeals to their hearers to come to the Saviour for salvation were seconded in most instances by prayers by the Rev. W. Le Pla [Congregationalist], Rev. G. Butcher [Wesleyan], and other local ministers of religion [e.g. Rev. W. Page, Baptist]. The platform exhortations were followed by personal appeals to individuals to join what may be called repentance classes and come to the enquiry

rooms which, also after the pattern set by the American revivalists, formed part of the movement.”

This was the beginning of Taylor’s campaign in the county town, which he saw as possessing a strategic importance. The *Bucks Herald* continued to record large audiences but by 22nd January was becoming more ironical in its tone:

“It is stated that considerable impression has been produced upon some of the more depraved characters in the town. We trust the effect will prove permanent. Next week these services will be held not in the Exchange, which is engaged by an Opera company, but in some of the Dissenting places of worship.”

On the 29th the paper continued:

“These services have been continued during the week in the County Hall and large congregations gathered on each evening to listen to the exhortations of ‘Happy Bill’ and his coadjutors. Much earnestness and enthusiasm have been displayed and we are told that a considerable degree of edification has resulted, particularly among the class who are supposed to stand most in need thereof.”

By contrast a more committed view of the same meetings appeared in *Word and Work* on 10th February, when it was reported that

“On Sunday afternoon ult. the Exchange was filled with children who retired at three o’clock, after which the adults about 2000 in number waiting outside were admitted to a second service; again, in the evening at eight the same building was crowded. Mr. C. Russell Hurditch spoke on each occasion with much power.”

Hurditch (1839-1908) was a well known preacher and hymn-writer, as well as being editor of *Word and Work*.

There was a consistent pattern in Taylor’s work. In towns there would be evangelistic meetings held in some public building. The support of local ministers was obtained and their presence on the platform secured. The resulting converts would be enrolled in house classes for teaching and prayer. Tracts and

scripture portions were distributed and sold. The emphasis on literature work is highlighted in *Word and Work* on 24th February when it was reported that

“At the close of three services when they were offered for sale nearly 1000 copies [i.e. of Bibles] were purchased.”

In rural areas tent meetings or open-air meetings were held, sometimes for groups such as agricultural labourers or navvies. In some cases a permanent building might eventually be erected, but apparently more as a base for missions rather than as a place of worship only. Allusions in newspapers and in mission reports suggest that Taylor’s message was the revivalist theme leading to the sinner’s conversion or to rededication.¹²

In his next report a note of satisfaction enters when Taylor noted that nine hundred converts and workers had met for tea at the Corn Exchange,

“... not a few coming from the surrounding villages the larger proportion comprised working men and women. The large attendances at the various regular services, the sparsely attended ale-benches, and the general quietitude which pervaded the town, were referred to as practical indications that these services had been fraught with much blessing.”¹³

Unfortunately, the archives of the Aylesbury magistrates do not survive for this period!

Taylor added that meetings would continue in the Corn Exchange, that associations were being formed for both men and women, and that it was hoped to extend the work from Aylesbury into its surrounding villages. Soon he was at work in Waddesdon where working men were seen “weeping about their souls”, and planning to go on to Naphill. The indefatigable Taylor concluded his report: “This is grand work.”¹⁴ In both these last mentioned villages — as on other occasions — he commented on the class and background of his hearers. This may have been intended to underline the definitely evangelistic emphasis of his work and to enlist sympathetic support from his readers.

By now the *Bucks Herald* was becoming disenchanted and merely noted briefly that the evangelists were

“... unwilling to leave the neighbourhood having had a better reception here. We hear that they have arranged to hire the Corn Exchange for their Sunday services for a period of twelve months.”¹⁵

But it would appear that their work was gaining momentum and by July 1876 the need of a permanent building in Aylesbury was felt by them. *Word and Work* recorded that a

“... Bible and Tract Depot is to be opened in Aylesbury by our brother J.E. Taylor in connection with this evangelistic work. From ten to fifteen cottage meetings are held every week in the town by the converts, attended with much good.”¹⁶

Taylor continued in Aylesbury throughout the summer while William Grove undertook much of the rural work. In November a piece of land off St. Mary’s Square at the top of Granville Street was purchased at a cost of £170. Among the benefactors were John Bates, a nurseryman from the Bicester Road, and Mrs. Emma Grace of Naphill.³ (She made many similar gifts to chapels all over the country.) By May 1877 a brick-built hall with a cottage attached was rapidly approaching completion and, it was said, “although not the largest is decidedly the best building in the town”.¹⁶ Later that month a gas supply was laid on.¹⁷

Arrangements for the opening are described in *Word and Work* on 31st May:

“Gospel Hall, Aylesbury. The opening of this new hall is fixed for Tuesday June 19th, when there will be meetings at 12 o’clock for prayer and at 3 for prayer and exhortation. Tea will be provided at 5 o’clock and at 6 p.m. the meeting will be resumed. About a hundred pounds remain to be contributed towards the erection of the hall, and it is hoped that this will be subscribed at once, so that the hall may not have to be closed after the opening meetings. We would recommend our friends to make an effort to spend this day in the country.”

A special train from London was arranged.

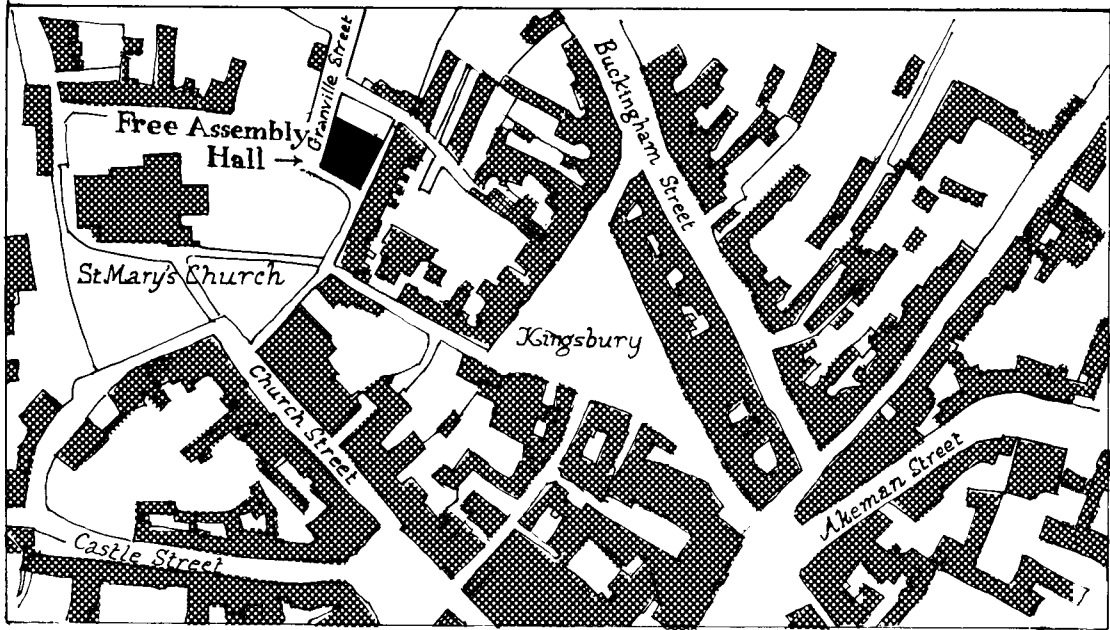


Fig. 1. Sketch map showing the position of the Free Assembly Hall, Aylesbury.

Further arrangements for the celebrations included several preachers who would hold services at 11 a.m., 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. on the 19th, and dinner and teas on sale in the Corn Exchange. The public were exhorted to come in good time. Taylor himself "intimated his intention (D.V.) to enter every town and village in Bucks and hold meetings, making Aylesbury the centre of operations".¹⁸ It was announced that the Hall (which could seat up to 750) "will be let for any good purpose, as it is especially desired to divest the building of anything like a sectarian character".¹⁹ It is not clear how far this hope was realised, but the Hall was certainly used by the Y.M.C.A. in succeeding years.

After the opening of the Assembly Hall in June 1877 there were fewer references to Taylor or to Buckinghamshire in *Word and Work*, and very few after 1882. However, the Hall continued as a place of worship almost continuously until its demolition in 1962-3. It

was rebuilt on the same site in 1963 and became known as the Granville Street Evangelical Church.³

John Elphinstone Taylor died suddenly on 8th November 1912 and was buried in the great Victorian cemetery at Nunhead in Lewisham, not far from his last home in Wood Vale. His wife Mary died in 1916 and was buried beside him.

According to his obituary²⁰ he had founded chapels in Aston Clinton, Aylesbury, Chesham, Dinton, Hardwick, Hawridge, Lower Winchendon and Wendover, and outside Buckinghamshire in Berkhamsted, Tring and Uxbridge. From a comparison of local *Directories*, newspapers and building inscriptions it appears that the order was Chesham (1876, but not solely through his efforts¹), Aylesbury (1877), Aston Clinton (1878), Hawridge (1879), Wendover (by 1880), Dinton and Hardwick (both 1883), and Lower Winchendon (1885).

The cases of the out-of-county chapels are less certain: Berkhamsted (possibly c.1890 but by 1902), Tring and Uxbridge (possibly by c.1900 but by 1912). It appears that Taylor was also concerned with the chapel at Naphill (possibly 1871 but by 1881²¹).

The following have been converted to other

uses: Aston Clinton (garage warehouse), Hardwick (private house) and Wendover (tea room). All the other Buckinghamshire chapels remain as either Baptist or Brethren places of worship, although those at Aylesbury, Chesham and Naphill have been reconstructed in recent years. The Bucks Evangelistic Mission is still a registered charity.

REFERENCES

1. Anon., *Gospel Hall, Station Road, Chesham. The Hundred Years 1876-1976*, (1976).
2. Now the Gateway Montessori School.
3. Anon. [D.P. Watkins], *The Assembly Hall, Aylesbury. A Centenary Review*, 1977.
4. E.g. Bucks RO, NB/7/2 Trust deed of Dinton Baptist Church, 1896.
5. *Word and Work* 25 March 1875.
6. See J. Wilson, 'Sources for the history of the Christian Brethren', *The Local Historian* (1981).
7. *Word and Work* 12 August 1875.
8. Since renamed the Guildhall. A new Town Hall was built in 1904.
9. *Word and Work* 2 December 1875.
10. *Word and Work* 9 December 1875.
11. Formerly just off Market Square by Long Lion, now the site of the Civic Centre.
12. E.g. *Bucks Herald* 8 January 1876, *Word and Work* 9 March 1876.
13. *Word and Work* 17 February 1876.
14. *Word and Work* 9 March 1876.
15. *Bucks Herald* 25 March 1876.
16. *Word and Work* 18 May 1876.
17. Bucks RO, U/2/2, Minute Book of the Directors of the Aylesbury Gas Light and Coke Company Limited.
18. *Word and Work* 28 June 1877.
19. *Bucks Herald* 23 June 1877.
20. *Bucks Advertiser and Aylesbury News* 16 November 1912.
21. Letter to author from Mr. S.J. Baker of Naphill, 1978.