

A CHAIRMAKER'S STORY

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In the midst of all the celebrations to mark the 300th. Anniversary of John Wesley's birth, another event, of great significance to Independent Methodists, has gone virtually unnoticed. 2003 marks the 150th. Anniversary of the death of Peter Phillips, the early Independent Methodist leader and sometimes described as the denomination's founder. A plaque in Friars Green Chapel records his death on May 11th. 1853 at the age of 75 and commemorates his life and work. The words of the epitaph sum up his worth to those who knew him:

'The church has lost a zealous defender of the truth, his family an affectionate father and suffering humanity a faithful friend.'

Peter Phillips encapsulated the spirit of a body of Christians who lived out a simple but effective faith during an age which is now long forgotten. The complex world of the 21st. century could learn from his humble example. It is not a story of fame and achievement; rather, as in the parables of Jesus, its subject is an ordinary man who worked with his hands and lived out his faith in his home and workplace. This account will tell his story and reflect on its significance.

Peter Phillips was a chairmaker of the fourth generation. His great-grandfather, Adam Phillips, was a native of Reading. William Phillips, his grandfather, migrated to Warrington to set up his trade there. He died in 1765 and was buried in the grounds of the Parish Church. William Phillips, the second, father of Peter was born in 1745 and lived until 1801.

William the younger married Jane Crane, a native of the Isle of Man, at St. James Church, Warrington. In later years, she spoke of premonitions, at the time of her marriage, that her life would prove to be a troubled one. So it proved to be. Her husband became a heavy drinker, probably an alcoholic, and remained so to the end of his life. This would influence the course of Jane Phillips' own life and that of her children.

Family

The family Bible of the Phillips family recorded the names of twelve children – five boys and seven girls. Peter was the fifth child, born on January 10th, 1778. Two others became significant figures in their own right. John, the eldest, became a Wesleyan Methodist minister and lived to the age of 90. Joshua became a well known figure in the town and was the first Sunday School superintendent at Stockton Heath.

Of the early life of Peter Phillips only a few facts are known, but they are all significant. Domestic life was difficult because of his father's drinking habits. For many years, William Phillips was the town crier of Warrington and therefore a well known figure who could be seen around the town, wearing his badge of office, an embroidered coat with knee breeches to match and his hair in a pigtail. His office entailed various duties. One was supervision of the fire engine; another was the flogging of people who had been found guilty of rioting or disorder. Mounfield describes how he felt about this role:

'This task greatly touched the sensitive town crier, whose strokes fell lightly and whose duty was often performed with tearful eyes. Deeply sensitive when called upon to inflict pain, he nevertheless inflicted untold pain on his family. Hiding from a drunken father, and finding an asylum for his younger sisters when turned out into the street, was one of the earliest experiences of Peter Phillips, and in his old age it was not forgotten.'

This unpromising start to life could have led to a predictable pattern of repeated behaviour in the next generation, but Peter's obituarist later commented that William's habit had the effect of giving his children an aversion towards his obnoxious behaviour and a determination to do better. Their mother, who was evidently a moral woman, if not a convinced Christian, also helped to steer them in a more positive direction.

Education

Educational opportunities in the late eighteenth century were limited. There was no state education system and most of the few schools which existed were fee-paying. However, Peter and his siblings were born just at the beginning of a new source of education for poor children: the Sunday School. From about 1780 onwards, Sunday Schools sprang up in different parts of the country, not as 'nurseries' to churches, but as places of elementary education, where reading, writing, arithmetic and music were taught. Warrington, then with a population approaching 10,000, had only one Sunday School, organised by the Church of England and held in Roebuck Yard, off Bridge Street. Like other such establishments, it would hold sessions which were the length of the later day schools, with a full morning, a lunch break and a full afternoon. This would provide the only education which Peter Phillips ever had.

The spiritual influences on the young Peter came from two sources and they would account for his adult views and practices. In both cases, his older brother, John, played a significant part.

Mentors

The Phillips family home appears to have been in the lower Bridge Street area of Warrington, near to the banks of the Mersey and a teeming centre of population, with hundreds of people inhabiting each of the 'yards' of tenement houses which led off the main street. Living so closely together, buying and selling from one another, no one could escape attention in this tight community. Among the inhabitants were Thomas and Mary Watts, a Quaker couple who had their own home-based business in Friars Gate as tallow chandlers and soap boilers. They became mentors to the young John Phillips during a time of spiritual searching; in due course, Peter also came under their influence and from them he imbibed some of the Quaker values which stayed with him throughout his life.

The second source of influence was the nearby Wesleyan Chapel in Bank Street. Again, John led the way in starting to attend it. Why he went to the Wesleyans rather than to the Quakers is not known; with the exception of the Watts family, the Warrington Quakers seem to have lacked something which the Wesleyans had, which probably explains later events.

In due course, John took Peter to Bank Street with him. One of the great memories on which he would later look back was an occasion when, at 12 or 13 years of age, he watched a venerable old man mount the pulpit steps to preach – and then leave by coach for Liverpool. The old man was John Wesley, 87 years of age and wanting to do more for God before he 'dropped into the dust' as he put it. John and Peter Phillips continued to attend Bank Street and there they both eventually came to saving faith in Christ.

Towards the end of the last decade of the 18th century, a young woman made her way to Warrington to escape a cruel and oppressive home background. She made her home with her brother, a devoted member of Bank Street Chapel and host to one of the society's class meetings. Hannah Peacock, born in 1780 and not yet 20 years of age, had given her life to Christ before she arrived in the town and soon made a difference to her brother's class meeting. There she met members of the Phillips family and became the means of the conversion of Peter's elder brother, John.

About the year 1796 - and there is no primary source to confirm the date - a problem arose in the Bank Street society, as a result of a conference ruling which gave ministers the right to insist on holding all meetings on chapel premises. This was evidently because cottage meetings, which were popular in many areas, had become sources of disorder and revivalist extremism. The minister for Bank Street, John Booth, was based in Northwich, nine miles away, and was an infrequent visitor to the chapel, where local preachers had become accustomed to running the society with the minimum of outside direction. When he took steps to enforce the conference ruling, he immediately hit opposition. While some members were prepared to forego their cottage meetings, others were not, so they quietly withdrew and formed a society of their own. Among them were Peter Phillips and Hannah Peacock, not yet old enough to be in leadership, but as convinced as their companions that this was the right step to take.

Quaker Methodists

Over the next few years, the dissidents met in rented premises and gradually acquired a character of their own. They were joined by some disillusioned Quakers, whose own societies apparently lacked spiritual vitality and who saw in the new group a body of people who practised what they themselves had long advocated - a free and open ministry, in which no one carried higher status than anyone else and all served gratuitously. Peter Phillips, who had come under Quaker influence in earlier years, must undoubtedly have aided this process of integration, having experienced both forms of worship and church polity. Soon the new group became known as 'Quaker Methodists' or 'Singing Quakers'. By 1801, Peter's abilities were beginning to be recognised and he preached his first sermon, from Job 33:28-29, at a cottage meeting at Whitley Reed, a rural location with a long Quaker heritage.

The year 1802 was to prove a momentous one in Peter's life. In that year, he married Hannah Peacock and together they began a journey of companionship and shared Christian service that would last for over 50 years. In those days, all marriages had to take place in Anglican Parish churches, so Peter and Hannah were married at the nearby church of St. James.

To set himself up independently in business, Peter built a house for Hannah and himself in Ship Yard, a narrow, winding thoroughfare off Bridge Street. This would provide both home and chairmaker's workshop for the whole of their married lives. There they raised a large family, nine of whom grew to adulthood. Any consideration of Peter's ministry over the subsequent 30 years needs to take into account that it was fulfilled alongside the running of a business and the demands of his growing family.

Chapel Building

The year 1802 had further significance to it. Peter was now recognised as a preacher and therefore a leader in the society. By now, the society, having seen considerable growth from its first beginnings, was ready to build its first chapel. A piece of land was purchased on the edge of the grounds of the great Augustinian friary which once stood near to the centre of the town. The location was known as 'Friars Green' - and this became the name by which the church would be known.

The building work presented a challenge; the members were not rich and so they resolved to build the chapel themselves. As Peter Phillips was the only one with a trade relevant to building, much of the directing of the work fell to him. There was no architect to consult and no local authority planning committee to give permission or offer guidance. Peter's obituarist in later years described what happened:

The preachers, among whom was our departed brother, set the example, and those who had an hour allowed for dinner, at their usual employments, got a hasty meal and ran off to the place where the chapel was being built, to chip bricks or tread mortar, till the hour was expired; and again at night after six o'clock. Preachers and leaders and members were seen mixing with those who had the work in hand, working until dark, some making mortar, some carrying it, some chipping bricks, others carrying them, some filling the barrow and others wheeling it. It was a curious sight; it was more, it was a lovely sight, it was a proof positive of their love to God and man. To the people around it was a novel sight; they thought it strange to see Preachers building their own place of worship, and they went by hundreds to see them.

Eventually, the chapel was completed: a plain building, simply furnished with benches and a table for a pulpit. This would be the church's home until 1859. The interior layout of it is shown on an early Ordnance Survey map, while a line drawing from the 1820s shows it as a small building with lancet windows.

The land surrounding Friars Green Chapel was made into a burial ground. (This was cleared early in the 20th. century to make room for a new Sunday School building.) The interior of the chapel was lit by candle and a stove provided warmth in the winter months. Initially, there was no instrumental music – just a singing group, of which Peter Phillips was the leader. Worship was a mixture of Methodist and Quaker. After Wesley's pattern there would be three hymns in a service; but as few people could read, the leader would read two lines at a time, after which people sang them. As a result, the singing of a single hymn would be a lengthy procedure! There would also be prayer, Scripture reading and

preaching. But unlike other forms of Methodism, there would be times of silent waiting upon God, after the Quaker fashion. Also, it appears that this society followed Quaker practice, at least in its earliest years, in not observing the sacraments. The oldest register at Friars Green is not of baptisms, but of 'births and namings.'

The building of Friars Green saw no diminution of outreach by the society, which could now properly be termed a church. From its early days, it operated a policy of outreach by establishing cottage meetings, mainly in village and rural communities around the town. An early example of this was the church at Lymm, formed in the home of Joseph Howard, where Friars Green supplied preachers for the small society which assembled in the family home. However, until possibly as late as 1806, the Quaker Methodists of Warrington appear to have had no idea of the existence of similar churches in other towns, nor did they have any expectation of becoming part of a new denomination.

As his home and business were located near the busy commercial centre of Warrington, Peter Phillips was well placed to meet local people during the course of his trade, including the members of his own congregation. Gradually, he became the man to whom the church looked for leadership.

Lorenzo Dow

Towards the end of 1805, Phillips, now 27 years old, was in Liverpool on business, when he had a seemingly chance encounter which would profoundly affect his church's future. Lorenzo Dow, a freelance American evangelist, had arrived in the city some days earlier and was conducting a meeting in the Zion Methodist New Connexion Chapel. Seeing a light on, Peter entered the chapel, listened to the message and found an instant affinity with this man and his style of ministry. George Herod, Primitive Methodist historian, described what happened:

Being particularly interested with the discourse, and the revival hymns he sang – which he had brought from America – he [Peter Phillips] gave him an invitation to visit Warrington, and liberty to preach in the Independent Methodists' chapel. Lorenzo accepted the offer; and as soon as convenient, he, with his wife, went; and they met with a cordial reception from both Mr. and Mrs. Phillips. He at once commenced his labours in the Independent Methodists' chapel, and the first evening, he and the society entered into a covenant to pray for a revival of religion; and very soon they had the unspeakable satisfaction of seeing their prayers answered.

Dow conducted several open air meetings in the Market Place and also visited Risley, a scattered agricultural community, where there was an outpouring of the Spirit. This led to the formation of a meeting in the home of one James Speakman. It became another of the country meeting places served by Friars Green Church and where Peter Phillips and others ministered.

Dow used the Phillips home as the base for his evangelistic work in the North West of England. He was one of the first to experience the hospitality for which they became renowned. Peggy his wife, who was pregnant at the time, remained in the home under Hannah's care, while Lorenzo undertook his travels.

Providing accommodation for Dow carried a serious risk for the Phillips family. This was an age of great political tension, when there was a real fear of a revolution such as the one which had recently happened in France. Methodists in particular, now severed from the Church of England, were thought, not least by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, to be potential revolutionaries and seditious. For this reason, non-Anglican preachers were required to take out a licence permitting them to preach. However, this entailed taking an oath of loyalty to the crown, which Dow refused to do, being an ardent republican. His refusal could have led to his imprisonment and the imposing of a fifty pound fine on any family who entertained him. Such penalties actually happened to several Primitive Methodist preachers during the coming years; both Dow and Phillips were fortunate not to be apprehended.

Nevertheless, this proved to be a fruitful time in Phillips' ministry and the life of the church at Friars Green. Between Lorenzo Dow's departure from Warrington early in 1806 and his return in May of the same year, the Church had added about forty new members.

First Annual Meeting

At some point, between May and July 1806, the churches which would form the embryonic IM Connexion met together for the first time, but neither date nor venue are known. This was no more than an informal gathering to discuss how they could form a union. However, Lorenzo Dow decided to undertake a tour of the participating churches a few weeks later. Peter Phillips and another Warrington member, John Mee, accompanied him on the first stage of his journey. On July 15, they walked together to Knutsford and held an afternoon meeting, then went on to Macclesfield and held an evening meeting, having walked twenty-four miles during the day. There, Peter visited, probably for the first time, the 'Christian Revivalists', one of the groups represented at aforesaid meeting and therefore one of the founder churches of the IM Connexion.

Dow stayed some days at Macclesfield, where his faithful companion, Dr. Paul Johnson, a Quaker evangelist from Dublin, joined him. Phillips and Mee returned to Warrington. Johnson and Dow then travelled in turn to Stockport, Oldham and Leeds, still journeying by foot.

The events of 1806 effectively marked the beginning of Phillips' wider ministry. Over the coming years, he visited all the towns named and preached there, going still further afield with the passing of years.

During the following November, the departure of Lorenzo Dow left Peter Phillips with a new responsibility. Years afterwards, Hannah Phillips related that the two men were returning from a preaching tour of Cheshire when Dow saw a stone barn in the rural hamlet of Stockton Heath and said that he would like to preach in it. Dow himself made no mention of this incident, but described how he made arrangements to use the barn, where he held nightly services over period of three weeks, before leaving for Ireland. The services were so successful that there was a clear demand for them to continue. It fell to Peter Phillips to undertake the work. Thus began the church at Stockton Heath, two miles from his home, and a new location for his ministry. One of its early leaders, Thomas Eaton, local manager of the Bridgewater Canal, became his firm friend and fellow worker.

Sunday School

During the following year, Peter and his brother Joshua launched a new enterprise at Stockton Heath in the form of a Sunday School. This was a very different undertaking from the present day. Sunday Schools were a relatively new institution and their purpose was to provide an elementary education in an age when few day schools existed and many children worked during the week. Thus, the Sunday School at Stockton Heath began at 8.30.a.m., lasted for the whole morning and afternoon, supplied basic teaching in reading, writing, arithmetic and singing, and catered for children whose weekdays were spent working on farms, the local smithy or on canal boats. Peter's eldest son, William, wrote an affectionate recollection of the school in later years:

After the morning lessons were over, those of the children who came from a great distance ate the dinner they brought with them in the school-room [the barn] ... The older boys and girls, when they knew my father had to preach in the afternoon, would be sure to wait for him, and if he happened to come before the time, they solicited him to sing with them the hymns and anthems which he had taught them. He used to draw a stave upon the door and teach them the elements of music; he was remarkably kind and affable with them, and became a great favourite. If he has been going home after labouring in a forenoon, a number of scholars would surround him and beg him to stay with them, saying, 'If you will let us share your company, we will share our dinner with you' and many times has he denied himself the comforts of home to make them happy.

1807 was to prove an eventful year for Peter Phillips, opening up new friendships and a wider circle of contacts. Lorenzo Dow finally left his house in April to return to America, shortly after meetings at Congleton and Harrishead (in the Potteries) which would have momentous significance. One of those who heard and met Dow at these meetings was a woodland carpenter and Methodist local preacher, Hugh Bourne, who was inspired to organise an open air camp meeting, similar to those which Dow had led in America.

Camp Meeting

Bourne decided to hold his first camp meeting at Mow Cop, a hill in North Staffordshire on May 31st. 1807 and used all possible means to make it known far and wide. News of this reached the Independent Methodists at Macclesfield and, in turn, the Quaker Methodists of Warrington. Peter and Hannah Phillips travelled through the night in a farm cart to be present and Peter took part in the preaching on the day. This was possibly his first meeting with Bourne; their friendship would last for a lifetime.

A second camp meeting was held on July 19th, after which Bourne went to Macclesfield to attend the Independent Methodists' second Annual Meeting. Later, he took up an invitation to visit Warrington, where he made the first of many stays at the home of Peter and Hannah Phillips. Once again, their renowned hospitality was given to a travelling preacher.

Bourne was eventually expelled as a Methodist local preacher for holding unauthorised camp meetings. He and his followers became known for a time as 'Camp Meeting Methodists' and maintained fraternal but informal relations with the Independent Methodists. For several years he made repeated visits to Warrington, preaching at Friars Green, Stockton Heath, Risley and other cottage meetings operated by this circle of churches.

'Magic Methodists'

Another friendship made by Peter Phillips at this time was with James Crawfoot, a resident of Delamere Forest and local preacher in the Northwich Methodist Circuit. He was also the leader of a free-spirited and mystical group of Methodists who engaged in dreams, visions, trances and prophecies. Their activities earned them the nickname of 'Magic Methodists'.

Crawfoot was in Warrington during the latter part of 1807 when he was asked to preach on the following day at Friars Green as the planned preacher was unable to come. Crawfoot agreed, subject to provision of a bed for the night. When news of this arrangement subsequently reached the ears of the Circuit officials, Crawfoot was disciplined for taking an unauthorised appointment. Eventually he was taken off the preachers' plan. Groups such as the Quaker Methodists, Magic Methodists and Camp Meeting Methodists were regarded with severe disapproval by the Methodist authorities who regarded them as fractious and troublesome.

Phillips' choice of friends says much about his character. He readily embraced Quaker stillness, charismatic gifts, open air preaching and the freedom of individual Christians to exercise their ministries without the constraints of any wider body than the local church.

While Peter Phillips had no formal education after his Sunday School years, he had an enquiring mind and continued to read widely. His son supplies the detail:

Having a large family to provide for, he could not devote so much of his time to the cultivation of his mind as he was anxious to do; yet, although his engagements in attending meetings were numerous, whatever time he could devote to reading and study was not lost, and by this means he acquired a vast amount of information of an historic, geographic and scientific nature; his powers of retention were truly surprising. His mind thus became expanded and well-stored, which rendered him an agreeable companion in conversation, and his easy and cheerful manner made him a welcome guest. I can well remember in the days of my boyhood listening with great pleasure to many interesting conversations between himself and people of various denominations while he has been busy at work; many of these persons ranked amongst the respectable, and possessed considerable literary attainments, and if at any time the conversation has taken a controversial turn, he has mildly but firmly defended what he conceived to be the truth.

Undoubtedly, his concern for the well-being of the rising generation motivated him to give great attention to Sunday School work. In 1810, three years after starting the school at Stockton Heath, he began another at Friars Green. In 1814, the Unitarian minister in Warrington started a discussion meeting; Phillips and others opposed the views expressed by the Unitarians, but did so with courtesy and won their respect.

Ministry of Women

During the years 1808-10, Peter and Hannah Phillips continued to welcome Hugh Bourne and another Potteries revivalist, William Clowes, to their home. During the Annual Meeting of 1808, held at Macclesfield, the subject of the ministry of women became a matter of dispute and controversy. Female preaching had been banned within mainstream Methodism in 1803, but the Quaker element in Peter Phillips' thought saw no problem, as in his view all were equal in the sight of God. Hugh Bourne was tasked with writing a pamphlet on the subject and he went back with Peter Phillips to his home, where he wrote the pamphlet and checked it with Phillips, who approved of his conclusions and asked his permission to print it. The pamphlet, *'Remarks on the Ministry of Women'* gave a biblical defence of female preaching. Although few Independent Methodist women took up preaching at the time, they faced no principled objection when they did so.

Later in 1808, Phillips hosted a meeting attended by Hugh Bourne, Dr. Paul Johnson (friend of Lorenzo Dow), James Sigston (a Leeds schoolmaster and revivalist) and himself. This was a meeting of some significance which brought together the leaders of the revival movement who met in order to see how they could advance the progress of revival. The outcome was a decision to publish the life of the American revivalist, Benjamin Abbott, in the belief that this would stimulate a greater pursuit of heavenly energy by the people.

In 1811, the revival movement saw a point of separation, though without rancour, when Bourne, Clowes and others established the Primitive Methodist Connexion and agreed to the financial support of preachers. Up to this point they had avoided taking this step, out of consideration for the views of Peter Phillips and other Independent Methodists who still held fast to their belief that ministry should be unpaid. Despite this decision, the friendship between both parties remained, but the Independent Methodists thereafter received less attention from the Primitives who were occupied with opening up new ground of their own.

For most Independent Methodists at this time, their own local circle of churches was the extent of their activity, other than when they met for the Annual Meeting. In Phillips' case, this meant overseeing the growing number of cottage meetings in the Warrington area. By 1815, his 'patch' included meetings at Risley, Croft, Culcheth, Appleton, Lymm, Lowton, Ashton-in-Makerfield (all in homes), the barn at Stockton Heath and the only chapel building at Friars Green. This meant sacrifice for all the family; he even went to preach at Lowton on the morning when one of his sons was born.

Annual Meeting travel

On occasion, Peter Phillips travelled further afield – a practice which would increase in later years as the Independent Methodists spread over a wider area. In 1815, the church at Sheffield, newly affiliated, hosted the Annual Meeting. Peter, now aged 37, attended with Richard Mills as Warrington delegates. His son, William, accompanied him and described the journey – 50 miles each way.

We travelled the whole distance on foot; as was the case in almost all his other journeys. ... There were no railways at one penny per mile, and the coach fare was so expensive that it was not possible for a man in his circumstances to travel in that way. On a moderate calculation he has travelled thirty thousand miles to his appointments. We walked to Stockport where our party there was increased by Gamaliel Swindells of Stockport, W. Parker of Macclesfield and others. In the course of our journey we saw many interesting sights, and my father's wisdom was very useful to us; he called our attention to every object worth notice. The peak of Derbyshire, celebrated for its natural wonders; the ebbing and flowing well, which is a very singular phenomenon. We had the good fortune to witness its flowing, which is preceded by a slight rumbling noise, which seemed to proceed from the fissures in the rock, from which the water afterwards gushed forth. My father was much gratified with the sight, and he then gave us an account of the various theories which had been put forth to account for so great a wonder. As we travelled through this remarkable and wonderful district we ascended to the top of the shivering mountain, and thence to Wringless and Speedwell Mine. The vast amount of information with which his memory was stored concerning these places, and the interest he took in communicating it, rendered him an exceedingly agreeable companion.

On arrival, Phillips preached several times during the Annual Meeting and was invited back five years later to conduct the opening services of the new chapel in Bow Street.

The contrast between journeys to Annual Meetings then and now could hardly be more pointed, but one is tempted to ask which type of journey offered the greater rewards. To a young boy in the early nineteenth century, this was the equivalent of global travel, while his father's discourses showed him to be a man of diverse interests and certainly no narrow obscurantist.

Throughout the years of Peter Phillips' early ministry the country was engaged in the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815 with the Battle of Waterloo. The effects of the ending of the war were to have profound implications for the country and, in turn, for Phillips' ministry. Town dwellers, not least in the North West of England, suffered as a result of the passing of the Corn Law which raised the price of bread. Moreover, there was a glut on the labour market as men returned from the war to find peacetime employment. Wages were pushed down accordingly and the gap between rich and poor widened.

In the country's Methodist churches, members were no less affected by poverty than others, but the funding of ministers (and often chapels with mortgages) meant that they had responsibilities beyond their own families. For the acutely poor, it was an impossible financial burden. This would drive a number of Methodists towards the Independent Methodist system for reasons of poverty rather than principle.

Lowton Common, near Leigh, was then a community of poor handloom weavers. In 1819 its Wesleyan Methodist society was at low ebb and, for a number of weeks, no preachers were sent to it. Richard Eckersley, one of the leaders, complained about this to the circuit authorities and reportedly received the reply, 'You do not deserve any preaching; you send us no money.' Thereafter, the leaders approached the Congregational Church in Leigh with a request to take over responsibility for the chapel (which was owned by local trustees), but the Congregationalists declined to do so.

At this time, the Independent Methodists already had a society in Lowton which had existed since 1806 or earlier in the home of James Ashton, who lived in a cottage opposite St. Luke's Church. Ashton was a preacher on the Warrington Circuit plan and Peter Phillips was a regular visitor to his home. Probably as a result of this, the erstwhile Wesleyans contacted Phillips and asked him to visit them, with a view to the Independent Methodists providing them with help. The outcome of his visit was that his church agreed to spend £40 on improvements to the building and arranged for a supply of preachers. In this way Lowton Common (which also had its own day school) became affiliated to the Independent Methodists and soon became a flourishing church. James Ashton's cottage-based society remained in existence until his death many years later, so for a time Lowton had two I.M. churches, about a mile apart. Even in 1819, Lowton Common was only the second church in the Warrington Circuit to have its own building.

Peterloo and after

1819 was an eventful year on several fronts. It was the year of a huge working class demonstration in Manchester, when thousands of people from nearby towns converged on St. Peter's Fields to protest peacefully in the cause of political reform. The Manchester magistrates, fearing violent attack, ordered the militia to break up the crowd. About a dozen people were killed and hundreds were injured. The event was later referred to as the 'Peterloo Massacre.'

Many Methodist lay people were among the Manchester demonstrators, including some handloom weavers from Wingates (Westhoughton), members of the society at Rose Bank, where the minister, Rev. S. Sugden, took a dim view of their political interests and their backwardness in paying contributions. Peterloo brought about the final rift between the minister and the weavers. Thereafter they rented a cottage where they started to hold their own meetings. Contact was made with Peter Phillips at Warrington and he came to them to explain the organisation and principles of the Independent Methodists whom they duly joined. As at Lowton Common, the egalitarian polity of the Independent Methodists suited the independent-minded weavers of Wingates who, by their own admission, were only too willing to 'preach and pray for themselves.' This church was born as much from political convictions as religious ones and it continued to be a force for social and political change in ensuing years. Peter Phillips and the other Warrington preachers now added Wingates to their itinerary, walking 22 miles each way to conduct services. As yet, Bolton Circuit lay in the future.

The days following the Peterloo Massacre saw Peter Phillips take action of a different kind, nearer to home. His church, like all churches of egalitarian character was under suspicion by the authorities as a potential seedbed for radical reform and even revolution. This suspicion seemed to be confirmed when he surprised his congregation that he would speak on the following Sunday from the text, 'He that hath no sword, let him sell his cloak and buy one.' When the day came, the chapel was packed, with officers of the law taking prominent positions in the congregation. Neighbours barricaded their windows, fearing a riot. In the event, what they heard was a pacifist message. The sermon alluded to the beating of swords into ploughshares, the submissive of Christ in suffering, loving enemies and the injunction to Peter, 'Put up thy sword.' Referring to Christ as 'the Prince of Peace', Phillips argued that His government should be a government of peace in which His people should neither hurt nor destroy. Through a timely announcement and a single sermon he had deflected official suspicion away from his own proletarian church.

Bolton

The following year saw yet another church come into being as a result of conflict over political and social views. The Wesleyan Methodists, anxious not to be seen as political insurgents, discouraged their members from involvement in reform groups. This led to an open rift in the Bridge Street Wesleyan Methodist society between the minister, Thomas Hill and some of his members who were admirers of the radical campaigner, Henry Hunt. The outcome was that ten men left Bridge Street and in February 1820 formed a church in a house. According to William Fallows, who later left Bolton for America, all were Radicals. Once again, Peter Phillips was contacted and the new church adopted an Independent Methodist identity. Unlike Wingates, Bolton had no preachers at first and was supplied on alternate weeks by the churches at Warrington and Manchester, the former travelling on foot and the latter on canal boat.

No record exists to show how many churches linked with the Independent Methodists as the result of a first contact with Peter Phillips, but the fact that he was approached on each occasion indicates the measure of his significance.

The early 1820s saw Peter Phillips engage in a public act which revealed a further aspect of his views and values. It was the time of the coronation of King George IV and the already notoriously libertine king now added to his reputation by excluding his wife, Queen Caroline, from the coronation ceremony by shutting her out of Westminster Abbey. While this caused public revulsion, many people made no open response, no doubt fearing the consequences of engaging in apparently revolutionary activity. Peter Phillips, however, was not prepared to remain silent on the matter and felt that a public expression of disapproval should be made in his home town of Warrington. Arthur Mounfield related the story:

Peter Phillips was determined that the town should know that there were at least some who thought more of goodness than of royalty, and who professed no respect for a king who was not kingly enough to do right. No public building could be obtained for a meeting, and one could not be held in the streets. But a public protest there must be. The plan adopted was that of a procession. Meeting by permission, in a field at Arpley, and led by Peter and Hannah Phillips, the procession moved through the town to find its way to the field unmolested.

As Mounfield further pointed out, the actions of those who took part carried considerable risk in terms of loss of livelihood for the employed and loss of custom for the self-employed such as Peter Phillips himself. This incident is consistent with his Quaker background and outlook, whereby he placed a greater premium on truth and righteousness than on rank and wealth.

A Second Sunday School

In terms of his local ministry, the 1820s saw further expansion. One evening, he was returning from preaching at Croft and passed through the Cockhedge area of Warrington. There he saw evidence of the growing problem of urban poverty as he observed the ragged children in the streets. This experience led him to initiate a new project – a school where poor children could be gathered and taught to read and write, as well as to receive Biblical instruction. In 1823, this school was built in Brick Street and Phillips drew on his earlier experiences at Stockton Heath in establishing it. Rather like later day schools, a body of managers appointed staff and directed its activities. Appeals to the general public, particularly its

wealthier element, were normal, since this was an example of a church undertaking a major piece of social work with its own limited resources. An annual 'Charity Sermon' at Friars Green (later 'Sunday School Anniversary') would also be a source of funding. The building took the form of two upstairs rooms, approached by outside stairways, with three cottages beneath. There, on Sundays, children and adults alike assembled to learn the rudiments of education which would provide many of them with the route to betterment for themselves and their families. From Brick Street school in later years came prominent townsmen as well as numerous preachers.

Four years after Brick Street was built, Peter Phillips and the Friars Green people took steps that would see one of their earliest preaching places on its way to independence as a church. The Barn Chapel at Stockton Heath was no longer available for their use, the owner requiring it for other purposes. Once again, funds had to be raised and a chapel was built alongside a nearby orchard. It took the name 'Providence Chapel' in recognition of the happy chain of circumstances which made its construction possible. This building is still used as the church hall at Stockton Heath to the present day.

The Beer Act

Time and events moved on, as Phillips passed his 50th, birthday and encountered a new phenomenon which would affect his own life and that of others. One of the great social problems of the time was drunkenness, but little was known about the properties of alcohol and how the problem could be best addressed. A popular perception was that spirits carried greater danger than beer. In the light of this, in 1830 the government passed the Beer Act, which allowed for unlicensed beer shops to operate, in the hope that this would encourage people to drink beer rather than spirits and so reduce the problem. The result was disastrous, with unregulated drinking dens proliferating everywhere and cheap beer offering the poor of the towns and cities an antidote to the misery of their living conditions. Drunkenness increased, poverty became greater and working hours were lost.

About this time, temperance societies were being formed to combat the drink problem, but most of these followed popular opinion and challenged only the drinking of spirits. However, in 1830 an Irishman named George Harrison Birkett made a call for total abstinence from all forms of alcoholic drink. Making a tour of northern England, he found audiences in several towns, but he found it difficult to gain a hearing in Warrington. Eventually he found a sympathetic response in Stockton Heath, where a society was formed in Providence Chapel, based on the total abstinence principle.

Peter Phillips was unconvinced by the abstainers' argument, believing what he and others had always understood, that beer had important food properties which were necessary to a healthy life. (It was common in IM churches at the time for visiting preachers to be given a glass of beer on arrival to conduct a service.) He was so concerned about the potential effects of abstinence that when his friend, Richard Mee, was about to sign the abstinence pledge, he seized him by the arm and exclaimed, 'Thee mustn't, Richard. Thee'll die!' But neither Mee nor any of the signatories suffered any ill effects and Phillips now began to rethink his position. At first, he became an abstainer for the sake of others, but later became a convinced teetotaler as the facts surrounding alcohol became more widely known. At this point, he threw himself unreservedly into the temperance cause and became a significant figure in the movement as a founding committee member of the British Temperance League. Locally, he was appointed to a secular committee which was devoted to spreading temperance knowledge. On this committee he sat alongside the town's leading industrialists and most prominent citizens; the humble chairmaker had received deserved recognition for his contribution to the life of his town.

Cholera and Typhus Epidemics

In 1831, Europe was afflicted by a devastating cholera epidemic which hit Britain in the following year. On 28th. May, 1832, the first suspected case was reported in Warrington and the first fatality followed a few days later. The part of the town where Peter and Hannah Phillips lived rapidly became the worst affected part of the town. This was an area of narrow passages, with houses built back to back and appallingly inadequate sanitary facilities. As the summer got hotter, the epidemic worsened and by July, the hottest month of the year, out of 116 who died of cholera in the town, 90 lived in this area. The streets were blockaded and few families escaped the disease.

Despite the huge risk to their own health and safety, Peter and Hannah elected to stay in their home rather than escape to the countryside as many did. This was a time when the sectarian spirit among churches was forgotten as Christians made common cause in the battle against disease and suffering. Hannah's nursing skills were put to use:

Her kind friends would persuade her to be very cautious and not to run headlong in the midst of danger, but she had a mission in the world, she had a work to do, and she did not selfishly calculate consequences. Putting her trust in God, she went forth beholding the ghastly awful sights, from which many who professed great zeal shrank, administering comfort by her words and prayers, as well as medicine to the body, she stood in the presence of many till their spirits departed to the unknown world.

Typhus Epidemic

The cholera epidemic passed, but the town's sanitary conditions received little attention. Fifteen years later, in 1847, a further epidemic struck - this time the killer was typhus fever. The situation was exacerbated by large-scale Irish immigration. Hundreds of thousands of destitute Irish had fled their country, following the famine of 1845-46, most of them coming to Liverpool and then on to other nearby towns, of which Warrington was one. Most of them settled in the same parts of the town where the cholera epidemic had struck, crammed into tiny hovels. A recent historian wrote, 'One of the most notorious [places] was Ship Yard, a chaos of back-to-back houses and sheds.' This was where the Phillips family lived. In one tiny house alone, 17 adults and three children of various Irish families lived together. Not surprisingly, people living in these conditions were particularly prone to disease. Once again, Peter and Hannah, now in their late 60s, ministered to their suffering neighbours. Peter's obituarist wrote:

There they were seen standing by the wretched beds of English and Irish in the most filthy houses in the town, lifting up their voices and preaching the Saviour as their only hope, and no entreaties of their friends could deter them from this work of love.

Hannah's ministrations were not only confined to these times of crisis, but were available whenever a need arose. An Irish woman came to Hannah's daughter, after her mother's death, and said,

I shall never forget her kindness when I came to Warrington a poor lone distressed creature, in a house in Ship Yard. I was in the pains of labour. I had no money. In my extremity, some said send for Mrs. Phillips. Your mother came. She kindly did for me all that was necessary without fee or reward and in addition she went and procured me food and clothing and made me comfortable. Sure I shall never forget her while I live.

Owenite Activity

On other fronts, Peter Phillips remained active in the pursuit of those issues which he believed to be of great importance. During the 1830s he was particularly troubled when the followers of Robert Owen were holding meetings in the town. Owen, founder of the famous New Lanark Mills in Scotland, was a well-known philanthropist, but the basis of his social ideas had no part for religious belief or activity. Like other evangelical Christians of his time, Peter Phillips viewed the process of a godless socialism with alarm, especially when Owenite ideas gained ground in his own town:

About twenty years ago, the followers of Robert Owen were making a great noise in Warrington, and many of the inhabitants embraced his doctrines. Our friend was very much grieved at the awful movement, and beside preaching in our own chapel, and exhorting his friends to aware of their awful delusions, he went accompanied by his brethren, to their meeting room and cried out against their abominations. Every Sunday evening, he or some other of the preachers preached at their very door, and exhorted the crowds that came to hear, to save themselves from those God-despising people.

In terms of the wider denomination, the 1830s were turbulent, with churches constantly joining and leaving. It was an unsettled time for Methodism generally, but the various upheavals left the Independent Methodists smaller in 1839 than they had been a decade earlier. In 1832, just a month before the cholera outbreak, the Annual Meeting took place in Warrington, with Peter Phillips as President, though

presidential duties at the time amounted to no more than presiding at the Annual Meeting itself. Phillips undertook his last stints as President in 1840 and 1841, having served for nine years in total.

Later Years

Old age appears to have brought little diminution in the activities of Peter Phillips. The absence of most Connexional records for the years 1838-46 means that there is a gap in the available information about his life, but the subsequent years show him busily preaching around the churches, studying to increase his knowledge, watching his family grow and giving support to the poor of his town. In 1848 he reached his seventieth birthday. By the standards of the time, this was a very advanced age; few people lived to be sixty. Inevitably his image as patriarch to his people was enhanced; he was almost certainly the last survivor of his church's early leaders.

References to his preaching ministry during these years show that he continued to be greatly in demand. In 1850, in company with William Sanderson, he conducted the re-opening services of the chapel at Bond Street, Prescot, while in February 1851 he preached at the first service to mark High Legh's affiliation to the Independent Methodists. In 1852, he visited Oswestry where the church appears to have used his services often. A comment on his preaching is interesting: *'The discourses of our brother were full of richness and sweetness, though perhaps lacking the energy Methodists think indispensable.'* This is consistent with remarks noted elsewhere, which indicate that he was calm in his delivery and that he was *'more desirous of giving sound teaching than producing momentary excitement.'* *'Brilliant preaching he never attempted,'* was another remark, while he was noted for seeing the best in other preachers, especially those who were young or inexperienced.

Quaker Background

Phillips' early Quaker background never left him. To the end of his days, he and his wife insisted on wearing traditional plain Quaker dress, while His church kept the name 'Quaker Methodist' until 1844 when it adopted the more generally used 'Independent Methodist' name. This undoubtedly informed his views on church and ministry; he firmly believed in the equality of all believers, but was gracious and tolerant towards those who thought differently. By the same token, he strongly resisted the practice unwisely adopted by some IM leaders, of attempting to proselytise among other denominations. As a result, he was widely respected by leaders of the Warrington Churches.

In one aspect he was notably different from those of the Quaker persuasion: his love of music. He trained the choir at his church for special occasions and also encouraged his children to take up music. All of them could play an instrument and his eldest son, William, evidently did some composing and on one occasion wrote all the music for the Sunday School Sermons at Friars Green. One of his grandsons, Thomas Letherbrow, became talented in art and literature. He drew a portrait of Peter and wrote poems about both his grandparents, which were published in the Connexional magazine in later years. Brief excerpts from them must suffice.

Of Peter, he wrote 50 stanzas, including the following:

Long he taught and laboured,
But the country side
Knew his Quaker broad-brim
Through a circuit wide,
And men came as children
To a loving guide.

Hannah featured in some of those stanzas and also in a further 18 devoted to her specifically. Several of them touched on her practical ministry:

Here a voice of comfort
In the widow's ear,
And her voice of sunshine
Dries the orphan's tear;
Made the spring buds burgeon

Where the leaves were sere.

Bringing them together, he wrote:

One in work and worship,
Did these twain abide;
One in strong endeavour,
Till the eventide
From the kindling heavens
Drew the veil aside.

Phillips continued to exercise his love of learning throughout his old age. On one occasion, he was reading a Latin book when a Cheshire minister came to his workshop in connection with a job he had done for him. As the minister left, he was heard to mutter, 'An old wood-chopper reading Latin!'

But Peter's working days were nearing an end. His children eventually persuaded him to give up working (in an age with no state pension) and supported their parents in old age. One of the last anecdotes of Peter's life pictured him with his family on a picnic by canal boat from nearby Runcorn. All his nine surviving children (eight of them married) were present, and all his twenty-four grandchildren. This sentimental account describes the family surrounding the aged couple and singing as they journeyed. At the end of the journey, they went to a hired room where Peter preached to them.

Peter's last illness was protracted and painful. From his deathbed he passed on various messages. To the people of the Connexion, he warned against the *Testimony and Bond of Union*, a proposed constitution written by Alexander Denovan, and expressed disapproval of someone who 'railed' against the paid ministry – almost certainly William Sanderson. Thus, he was at odds with his successors in the Connexion's leadership. On the former point, the Connexion finally resolved its differences and it was Denovan rather than Phillips who was vindicated. On the latter point, however, he showed greater magnanimity than Sanderson who eventually learned to express his views less stridently.

To his church, he urged unity and love, with a particular injunction to focus on Sunday School work, where it was notably successful. He saw the greatest good as being done in this area.

The death of Peter Phillips came on 11th. May, 1853. He was buried in the churchyard at the side of Friars Green. Today the burial ground has gone, but his remains lie where they were placed, now beneath the church's schoolroom. The officiating minister (not named, but probably his friend and successor, John Roberts) said of him:

'His family have lost a kind and affectionate husband and father; the Church an able minister; the town a man truly devoted to its interests; the distressed have one friend less.'

Memorials

In due course, a tablet to his memory was erected in Friars Green Chapel, and this was transferred to the new chapel when it was built in 1859. His significance to the town was reflected in the fact that his portrait was hung in the Old Academy, not far from his home.

When Hannah Phillips died in 1858 she was buried in Warrington Cemetery, where her gravestone can still be found. It was recorded that over 1000 people were present on that occasion.

Today, portraits of Peter and Hannah Phillips are found in Friars Green Chapel, but copies of them are to be found in the museum at Wesley's Chapel, London. This places them in the wider context of Methodist history.

Like others before him, Peter Phillips had no intention of starting a new denomination, which was why he resisted attempts to give the Independent Methodist Churches a constitution. His conception was that of a fellowship of churches linked only by common values, friendship and voluntary support for each other, but without legally framed mechanisms. Such churches had in common their 'free' ministry, which lacked formal ordination, organised training, salaries and centralised discipline. It was a church run by the

people, for the people, and especially with an eye to the poor. Its strength lay in the fact that it touched people's everyday lives and brought opportunities for their advancement not only spiritually but educationally and materially. Phillips had no grandiose notions of expecting the whole Christian Church to change to his views, but was content to see his style of church be one among many, of value because of the benefits which it brought to those it reached.

Patriarch, counsellor, good neighbour, philanthropist, model citizen and faithful preacher of the gospel, Peter Phillips 'went around doing good.' For all these things, rather than the institutions he left, he is rightly remembered and honoured.

