

METHODIST CENTRAL HALLS

Firstly, please thank the Methodist Missions who allowed me to peruse their archives which proved to hold a mine of data on the Central Halls – not only the accounts, trustees meetings and leaders meetings, but the advertising literature and weekly activities sheets that have been crucial to piecing together the life experienced at Central Halls – Bolton, Wigan, Archway and Manchester as well as Liverpool and Bristol.

The Halls are a crucial part to understanding the nature of urban Methodism today. Certainly, one question that could be asked is ‘Would Methodism today continue to have the urban presence that it does today had the Central Hall movement begun?’ Probably not. At least 99 Halls of this type were built at a cost of no less than £2.8 million (roughly £90 million today) - all of it raised by voluntary subscription and chapel committee grants. They made not only a religious contribution but a significant social and cultural contribution by providing a convivial home for choirs, orchestras, trade union meetings and other philanthropic organisations. They are testament to an age of religious confidence, innovation and foresight – even when a Hall has had to close, the value of the site has enabled a society to build new premises.

KEY FINDINGS

A unique building type. ‘Open air preaching with a roof on’ - public buildings intended to attract and evangelise big crowds through the power of words and music, as opposed to religious architecture and ritual. Unconsecrated space, designed to house secular uses. Unlike most churches, buildings that were heated, ventilated, well-lit, provided with toilets and refreshment facilities – and in every respect designed for comfort.

Canny commercialism. Methodists understood business. The Central Halls included shops and rooms that maximised the value of prime city centre locations and gave continuing financial strength even when worshipper numbers were falling. Many of the Missions ran professional and extensive advertising campaigns, which used newspapers, magazines, advertising hoardings and cinema.

The importance of Manchester. Manchester Central Hall in Oldham St was the experimental prototype of the entire programme, stimulated by the success of evangelists Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey in pulling huge numbers to the secular Free Trade Hall.

Big Crowds. Right up to and during WW2, Central Halls continued to be major crowd-pullers. Many local authorities were unsure whether to classify them as entertainment premises or religious establishments. Methodism’s urban mission shared with the Kyrle Society, People’s Palaces and the Settlement movement - the ideal of bringing beauty ‘home to the people’ through active promotion of cultural activity and popular entertainment – film shows, concerts, variety, dances. These halls were (and in several cases still are) the best venue in town.

Trajectories of decline. Over the long period of national decline in Methodist congregations, Central Halls were afflicted by locally even steeper losses through inner-city demographic and economic change although even in the 1960s, Missions including Bradford, Sheffield, Bolton and Bristol could still occasionally attract congregations of up to 1, 000. Falling congregations faced increasing maintenance costs as the buildings aged – ventilating and heating systems become obsolete because of technological innovation. The case studies show how they tried - in some cases successfully – to use their unique property assets in new ways so as to maintain witness to the poor and needy. More space was given over for rental purposes as the worshipping church retreated into smaller rooms. Crosses, signs and other religious symbols become more common as the Central Hall community tried to make itself visible.

LESSONS LEARNED

The size and positioning of Central Halls often leads to wider communities associating them as the face of Methodism in that area and so, Ministers can enjoy good links with other religious and social groups. Those continuing in existence today have managed to adapt the building to meet the needs of the local area. Valuable services are offered to the communities reinterpreted in a modern light: outreach to asylum seekers, old age pensioners, prisoners and the homeless.

So, these large central buildings have been a mixed blessing for the Church and it is natural to ask what lessons can be gleaned from their story. Firstly, many of the problems that Central Halls faced in the 1960s now confront suburban and rural churches today. Many churches find themselves unable to pay maintenance costs. However, their central location, whether that be in city, town or village, ensure they are easily recognisable and so could be conceived not only as sacred space but as public space. Secondly, the arrangement requires careful management and a flexible approach to the use of the premises, prioritising the needs of the congregation. If able to cater to a wide variety of groups, the church can make contact with a greater range of people as well as reaping an obvious financial benefit that can be reinvested back into mission work and outreach.

OUTPUTS

A podcast on the religion and society website:

http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/methodist_central_halls_as_public_sacred_spaces

A Chapter on ‘Learning from Buildings’ in a forthcoming edited OUP journal ‘Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion’.

‘A Pool of Bethesda’: A journal article in the *Rylands Bulletin* about Manchester Central Hall.

A Book?

Angela is also putting together a database for the British Library’s Web Archive of Methodist Church websites. The rationale is that the sorts of weekly activities newsheets, etc that she

found very useful are often published online and she wants to create a web archive to preserve this data for future generations.