Wolverley Mission Church

*The Story of a Village Mission: A Brief History of the Rise and Progress of Wolverley Mission Hall*

by J.K. 1912

In the county of Worcester, about two miles north of Kidderminster, lies the old-world village of Wolverley. Little need be said here of the beautiful scenery in which it is situated, but it is interesting to notice that the neighbourhood contains many specimens of rock houses, a few of which are still inhabited. Indeed, it was in the midst of a little colony of these primitive dwelling-places that the Mission of which we are writing had its birth.

Miss A A Hancocks, the pioneer and leader of the work, is descended from a family which has borne an honoured name in Worcestershire for several generations, and is the youngest daughter of the late Mr A J Hancocks. Miss Hancocks belonged to the Church of England, and for many years worshipped at the Parish Church at Cookley (one mile from Wolverley), her father being patron of the living. In those days, the vicar of Cookley was an earnest, godly, and thoroughly evangelical clergyman, and from him Miss Hancocks received that training in the Scriptures and in Christian service which helped to fit her for what was to be her life work.

During the latter part of April, 1890, and evangelist from the Evangelization Society conducted a mission in Blakeshall School, which then belonged to Mr Hancocks. The series of special services were productive of much good, and marked the beginning of a work which has continued until today, and which has been signally owned by God. Miss Hancocks attended the meetings and played the harmonium, little thinking of the larger service into which she was so soon to be led as a result of this experience in evangelistic effort. Her interest in the spiritual welfare of the people on the Common was soon awakened, and a schoolmaster – Mr Tom Dillow of Cookley – having offered to conduct Sunday evening services, it was decided to continue the Mission for a time.

Mis Hancocks visited the people in their homes, and although Mr Dillow shortly afterwards left the neighbourhood, it was felt that it would be wrong to give up the services. The local preachers of the district – connected with various denominations – gladly gave their help, and although, in those days, there were no striking cases of conversion to relate, it is certain that hearts were touched and lives were changed – in fact, that simple schoolroom became a veritable House of God to many seeking souls, and the centre of spiritual influence that soon affected the whole countryside.

In 1892, the heart of the lady who had, without any desire on her own part, and almost unconsciously, became the leader of the movement, was gladdened by the co-operation of her sister; and until her death in 1908, Miss G I Hancocks gave to the Mission all the help which her sometimes precarious health permitted.

In addition to the Sunday evening services, there were weekly prayer meetings; a Men’s Bible Class was established, and cottage meetings were held in the homes of the people. It must not be supposed, however, that success came easily, and that there were no difficulties to overcome. Those who have had charge of the Wolverly Mission – as it is now called – have never been in danger of that “woe” spoken by our Saviour upon those of whom all men speak well. Almost from the first there had been opposition, and sometimes it had been serious and bitter. The Vicar of the parish could not give the work his blessing; on the contrary, he severely reprimanded Miss Hancocks, and told her that if she did not desist, he would cease to acknowledge her. As “giving up” was out of the question, the threat was carried out, and the lady who was, perhaps, doing more Christian work than anyone else in the parish, was virtually excommunicated!

It is strange, and yet sadly true, that even good people whose theology is narrow and whose ideas of salvation and of the Church are taken from anywhere but the New Testament, will try to hinder those whose chief desire it is to be “witnesses” for Jesus Christ and to bring others to the knowledge of the Saviour. But the work at Blakeshall was of God and not of men, and, consequently, it flourished in spite of all opposition. The Gospel was faithfully preached for some years, sinners were converted, and many triumphs of Divine grace were witnessed by the little band of honest toilers.

In 1898, a new Vicar was appointed to the Parish of Wolverley, and he would have like to take over the Mission, and work it in connection with his own Church. There were various reasons why those responsible for the movement felt unable to agree to this arrangement, and, accordingly, it was courteously but firmly declined. In consequence of this action, Miss Hancocks was informed that the Blakeshall schoolroom could no longer be used for the purposes of the Mission, and that the services must cease after December of that year. When she asked where such gatherings could be held, she was told that people must go to the Parish Church – the only proper place for them. Needless to say, such treatment as this, and the prospect of being “homeless” as a little Christian community, much disturbed the minds of those chiefly responsible for the Mission.

The last Sunday evening service under the old conditions will never be forgotten by those privileged to attend it. The hearts of the worshippers overflowed with deep feeling, in which joy and sorrow were mingled; happy recollections of the past alternated with anxious anticipations of the future. The place had become endeared to those who had often met with God within its walls; and to be compelled to leave it, with no prospect of finding another meeting-place, was a sore trial. Was the work to be brought to an end? Could it be God’s will that an enterprise which He had so richly blessed should be frustrated and extinguished? This was the question uppermost in the minds of these men and women – almost all of them poor and unlettered – as they assembled for the last time in the building which had sheltered them and echoed their prayers and praises and the preaching of the Word for eight years.

But although the path seemed dark, these simple folk were convinced that, somehow or other, the Lord would provide. They knew that in the Mission services they had found something that was missing – to them, at least – in the more elaborate and formal services of the Church, and they could not believe that they were finally deprived of such a blessing. In humble faith they gave themselves to earnest prayer, and committed their cause to Him Who judgeth righteously, and Who is always faithful to His own. Immediately they were answered, for that very week, and in a remarkable way, a temporary home was found for them. They were offered the use of a kitchen, in what had formerly been a public house, and although the room was small, they gladly resorted to it week by week, and in spite of its adverse associations, it soon became to them the House of God. They believed with all their hearts the truth of Cowper’s beautiful words:

“Jesus, where’er Thy people meet,  
There they behold Thy mercy-seat;  
Where’er they seek Thee Thou art found,  
and EVERY PLACE IS HALLOWED GROUND.”

All this time, prayer was made to God for the provision of a home of their own, and at length the request was granted. Several attempts to purchase a site for a Hall proved futile, the vendors refusing to sell for such a purpose; but eventually, owing to the efforts of Mr Rees, who had come to reside in the neighbourhood, an suitable piece of land was secured, on which an iron building was erected at a cost of £112. The very low price for the building was due to the fact that the men attending the Mission took a considerable share in the work. With a devotion that promised well for the future of the undertaking, many of the men, instead of going home after a long day of toil in the fields, made their way to the new site, and there, by the light of lanterns, laboured on until late at night, levelling the soil and digging out the foundations. The people generally made great sacrifices and prelisted genuine self-denial in their effort to raise the sum required for the cost of the building, and although, when the work was begun, and £5 was in hand, the Hall was opened actually free of debt, and amid great rejoicings, on October 8th 1899.

During the twelve or thirteen years that it has been standing, this unpretentious iron building has testified by its presence – and still more by the worship and services carried on within it – to the reality of the spiritual world and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the July following the opening of the Hall a Sunday School was instituted, and since then many of the scholars have heard the voice of the Saviour and given their hearts and lives to Him. Nor have the children been the only persons to whom this village Mission has meant eternal salvation. Numbers of men and women, some of whom had been in spiritual darkness for years, have been led to Him Who is “the Light of the world”; and many more have there found , on Sundays and on week evenings, comfort, instruction and inspiration. One man, converted at the Mission, and rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins, was more than once on his way to the Hall on a Sunday afternoon when he was met by the Vicar. Asked where he was going, the man would reply “To my Bible-class”, and when urged to turn around and accompany the Vicar to Church, his answer always was: “No, thank you; I shall stick to those who picked me out of the gutter and led me to Christ”. It is such cases as this that are at once the justification and glory of the Wolverley Mission.

In the year 1906 it was though advisable to form a membership roll, and after a few simple rules had been drawn up, and number of friends banded themselves together and were solemnly admitted to the privileges and duties of Church fellowship.

Two years later, the Mission suffered a great and, indeed, irreparable loss in the passing away of one of its leaders, Miss G I Hancocks. She had been a devoted worker in its interests and a great helper to her sister for no less than sixteen years, and she had won the love and esteem of all those associated with her in worship and service.

The “coming of age” of the Mission was made the occasion of a special meeting on May 24th, 1911, and then it was that the project for a new and permanent building was actually launched. For some while past it had been felt that the iron room was in many ways unsuitable and inconvenient, and at last it was decided that the time had arrived when a substantial brick Hall should be erected, the present building (in a slightly different position) being retained for Sunday School purposes. At the anniversary meeting, promises were announced amounting to £165, and at the date of issue of this little booklet that sum had been slightly increased. The cost of the new building (including the removal of the old) will be about £780. Whether it will be possible to open it free of debt – probably some time in September – depends largely upon the response made to the appeal of the workers by Christian friends in the neighbourhood and in other parts of the country. The people themselves have contributed splendidly, and have not yet done all they mean to do; but they look to the Lord’s stewards, whose resources are larger than theirs, and who are interested in evangelistic work in the villages, to come to their help.

From Wolverley, as from all country and purely agricultural districts, there is considerable migration among the young people. Many town and city churches reap at least something of what is being sown in such Missions as that at Wolverley. Among the subscriptions to the Building Fund is one of five dollars each from two young men now in Canada who, like many others, owe much to the little Mission on the hill, and *un*like so many others, have not forgotten the debt. Among the agencies at work in connection with the Mission, and endeavouring to raise funds for the new Hall, is the Women’s Sewing Class, which is rendering noble service in this respect.

Looking back over the last twenty-one years and forward to the future, we cannot but exclaim “What hath God wrought!” and “The Lord is able to give thee much more than this”.

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[In 1938 it was agreed that the Oldbro’ chapel be closed and members should join with the Wolverley Mission at a date to be decided. In 1940 the Oldboro’ (also known as Sladd Chapel) chapel was sold to Mr Francis Nicholls for £50.]