

Lost chapel of the Miner's Lamp

By Maurice Large

A conversation recently with the Rev Alex Bradley sparked off my inquisitive nature. He was interested in something I had said about our former church in Choppington, a mining village about 15 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne. There was a story that Choppington church used to be known as 'The Chapel of the Miner's Lamp', from their custom of lighting a miner's lamp to hang in the church during services, in memory of the members of the church who had died in mining accidents over the years.

Further investigation, particularly into the records of our late Secretary Ron Coulson, revealed a reference to an *Inquirer* article in October 1951. Through the good grace of Dr David Wykes, director at Dr Williams' Library, London, I obtained a copy of the article. It was written by the brother of the last survivor of Choppington church who worshipped with us at Newcastle after Choppington closed and was a most generous benefactor to us in her will.

The article describes the efforts being made to maintain and renovate the fabric of the building, but also gives a fascinating insight into the beginnings of Unitarian worship in a small mining community in the North-East of England:

'The founders of the church were Sir J Baxter Ellis, the Rev JC Street, and the brothers John and Robert Elliot, of Choppington. Prior to the erection of the church open air services were held on a "little green hill" skirted by a little brook where, it is recorded, over 1,000 people used to attend.

'The Right Hon Thomas Glassey, one of the members of the first government of Queensland, was an active worker in this little church, where he used to teach the miners to read and write in those days. The Right Hon Thomas Burt, known as 'the father of the House of Commons' was also a frequent worshipper. Both of these men in their younger days worked at Choppington Colliery.'

Sir Joseph Baxter-Ellis was the first Lord Mayor of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and a member of the congregation at the Church of the Divine Unity in Newcastle. The Rev JC Street was minister to that congregation from 1864 to 1870. Thomas (Tommy) Burt was a miner and one of the first working-class MPs. The Northumberland Miners' Association named their Trade Union Offices building Burt Hall. The building – in Northumberland Road, Newcastle upon Tyne and now used by Northumbria University – was opened in 1895 and bears a plaque stating the hall 'was built by the miners' in recognition of valuable service rendered by Thomas Burt MP as general secretary for 27 years, and to commemorate his appointment as secretary of Board of Trade in 1892.'

The article makes reference to the lamp as follows:

'In front and above the reredos and altar table (which I had the pleasure of carving in oak many years ago), we will hang a miner's lamp – ever-burning – symbolical of the industry of the district and the light of Unitarianism which still glows at Choppington.'

There was a rumour that the lamp had been recovered from a mining disaster, that of the Hartley pit in 1862, which resulted in the deaths of 204 men. The beam of the pit's pumping engine broke and fell down the single shaft, trapping the men below. The disaster prompted a change in UK law to require all collieries to have at least two independent means of escape.

The belief that the lamp had been recovered from the pit was



Choppington Chapel centenary, held in 1964. Photo provided by Maurice Large

discounted when the lamp was found to date from the turn of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the close connection between the congregation and the mining community is graphically described in a poignant paragraph:

'Many a miner's child has received baptism here, and many have come to the Sunday School barefooted in the dark days of not so long ago. The crushed and broken body of the breadwinner sacrificed on the altar of the eternal fight for coal has been brought to this sanctuary to receive a farewell panegyric.'

Sadly the Choppington church is no more, as indeed Choppington Colliery is no more. I have a memory of participating in a Unitarian Young People's League (UYPL) service there in the early 1960s, and the photograph (taken at the centenary in 1964) shows it to be typical of many nonconformist chapels seen in small villages around the country. Today it is a patch of grass, and those who worshipped there would be hard-pressed to find anything of Choppington to recognise. Yet there is a recognisable shape to the gnarled tree shown in this recent photograph.

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We do indeed share principles and values that are a bedrock. And from our services we seek the spiritual, according to our own, individual theology. This is a challenge for ministers and service-takers, who need to consider the diversity of theologies amongst us. But it is also a challenge for us, in the congregation, as we try to relate to elements of a service that are expressed in traditional language, or that are non traditional. I leave the last word to the Rev Ashley Hills:

'What is a religious service?'

To join in a meeting is to so focus attention upon the Eternal, that through the reading of inspired and helpful writing; through the quiet of meditation, and the speaking of the truth in today's situation, each done in an atmosphere of reverence and expectation, our minds become sensitive to the Greater Presence, our hearts filled with wonder and adoration and our lives shaped to serve in the days to come.'

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