

Hugh Price Hughes and 'The Revival of Oxford Methodism'

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In late November 1898 the *Methodist Recorder*, British Methodism's principal weekly newspaper, published its special 'Winter Number'. Retailing at threepence, three times the price of the usual edition, the *Recorder's* 'Winter Number' was a substantial periodical containing a range of devotional, informative and entertaining articles, enhanced by numerous photographs and illustrations. One of the articles in the special Winter Number of 1898 was entitled 'The Revival of Oxford Methodism', and it described the transformation of 'an apparently decaying and poverty-stricken circuit' in three remarkable years in the early 1880s.¹ The author of the article, and the leader of the revival, was Hugh Price Hughes. In winter 1898 Hughes was a third of the way through his year's term of office as President of the Wesleyan Conference, and he was at the zenith of his influence in the Wesleyan and Free Church world. Founder and editor of the *Methodist Times*, Superintendent of the West London Mission, spokesman of the Wesleyan 'Forward Movement', co-instigator of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches, and representative of the 'Nonconformist Conscience' in British politics, Hughes expounded and epitomised a vision of Methodist mission which was ecumenical in the truest sense, embracing personal evangelism, social transformation and cultural engagement in the nation, the empire and the world.²

Although he had spent much of his ministry in London, and had been in the capital for a decade and a half by 1898, Hughes chose to focus in his article on his three years as Superintendent of the Oxford Wesleyan Circuit (1881-84). Oxford, of course, had a particular resonance for Methodists, since it was there that John Wesley located the 'first rise' of Methodism in the 1720s and 1730s. Oxford, with its urban centre, developing suburbs and rural hinterland also enabled Hughes to portray the sort of circuit with which many of his readers would be familiar. More important than familiarity, however, this case-study allowed him to present an example of a striking success in an apparently unpromising situation. 'The Revival of Oxford Methodism' offered an encouraging, exemplary and challenging story to British Methodists on the eve of the twentieth century. As Hughes argued, 'If such a Revival could take place in such a circuit where we seemed to be and, humanly speaking, were so weak, what may not be done in London, and the Midland Counties, and Yorkshire, and Lancashire, and Durham, and Northumberland?'³ This paper will examine the story of 'the revival of Oxford Methodism' in the 1880s, by considering what Hughes brought to Oxford, what he found there, what he did, and what he learned, before reflecting on how his years in the Oxford Circuit confirmed and developed his understanding and practice of mission.

Hugh Price Hughes was born in Carmarthen, in South Wales, in February 1847, the son of a doctor and grandson of a Wesleyan Methodist minister. The family was prosperous, and Hughes enjoyed a good education before entering Richmond College in 1865 to train for the Wesleyan ministry.⁴ He

¹ The article was reprinted in H.K. [Nehemiah Curnock], *Hugh Price Hughes: Leader of the Forward Movement* (London: Charles Kelly, 1903), 34-48; reference here at 47.

² For Hughes, see Dorothea Price Hughes, *The Life of Hugh Price Hughes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904); J. Armitage Robinson *et al*, *Hugh Price Hughes As We Knew Him* (London: Horace Marshall and Son, 1902) and Christopher Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes. Founder of a New Methodism, Conscience of a New Nonconformity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

³ Hughes, 'Revival of Oxford Methodism', 48.

⁴ Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 11, 13, 18-27.

left four years later with a London B.A. degree, and he served four circuits before his appointment to Oxford. At Dover (1869-72) Hughes took up the causes of temperance – at this stage a contested issue in Wesleyan Methodism - and opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts, legislation passed in the 1860s permitting the police to arrest women suspected of prostitution in port and garrison towns and to require them to undergo medical examination. Through his campaigning, Hughes became a staunch Liberal in politics.⁵ At Brighton (1872-75), as well as honing his skills as a preacher and platform speaker, he was profoundly influenced by the 1875 Convention for the Promotion of Scriptural Holiness, led by Robert and Hannah Pearsall Smith.⁶ Moving to Tottenham, in North London (1875-78), Hughes was appointed joint secretary of the Wesleyan Temperance Committee and first editor of a new journal, the *Methodist Protest*, dedicated to the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.⁷ In 1876 Hughes shared in the organisation of a Wesleyan London-wide mission, modelled on Moody and Sankey's campaign of the previous year, and he conducted an eight-day mission in Tottenham in January 1877.⁸ At Barry Road, Dulwich (1878-81) Hughes moved to an elegant Gothic chapel, serving an affluent and growing suburb. Hughes doubled the membership in three years through a blend of thoughtful preaching, informed by his studies in philosophy for a London M.A., carefully crafted liturgy, intentional revivalism, effective organisation and successful building projects.⁹ Opinions varied on Hughes' preaching. Frederick Atkins, who first met him in the Barry Road days, said that 'I do not think anyone would say that Mr Hughes was a great preacher.' But for Atkins, Hughes was 'the prince of platform speakers', because of his force of character, quick wit, and ability to deal with hecklers.¹⁰ As a leader of worship, Hughes maintained the tradition, inherited from John Wesley, of using the *Book of Common Prayer* for morning services. At a time when Wesleyans were moving away from the Prayer Book, anxious about the growth of ritualism in the Church of England, Hughes championed a liturgical service and encouraged the creation of a Choral Society to enhance and supplement congregational singing. Local Anglicans, disgruntled at ritual innovations in their own churches, found Hughes' sung services more familiar and more appealing, and deserted to the Wesleyans.¹¹ Evening services were more relaxed, 'following the informal and spontaneous practice of the Dissenting churches.'¹² Complementing high-quality worship, Hughes developed a pattern of organised revivals at Barry Road, involving the whole congregation in systematic visiting of the neighbourhood with invitations to special services. A host of new groups were set up, for educational or philanthropic purposes, or to offer opportunities for fellowship. In order to accommodate the expanding programme of activities, the 1874 chapel was extended with the addition of a Sunday school building and a large lecture hall.

Hughes' most recent biographer has suggested that the years of ministry at Barry Road gave Hughes a sense of 'the moral responsibility of all believers as the key to the integration of social responsibility and the life of the church.' Hughes, it is claimed, championed a 'morally responsible

⁵ Ibid., 28-40.

⁶ Ibid., 55-63.

⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁹ Ibid., 78-84.

¹⁰ Robinson, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 86.

¹¹ Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 82-64.

¹² Hugh Price Hughes, 'Centres of Spiritual Activity: VIII Wesleyan-Methodist Church, Barry-Road, East Dulwich', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 January 1884. [page?]

life', unfettered by rigid creeds, and grounded in 'an experimental religion'.¹³ There is, however, another way of reading Hughes' utterances of this period, and particularly his article describing Barry Road in a series on 'Centres of Spiritual Activity', published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. After a detailed description of the church's flourishing condition, Hughes turned to consider the reasons for success, asking: 'How can so rapid a growth be explained?' 'First and chiefly,' he asserted, 'by the fact that the Christianity of this church has been from the first of an enthusiastic and aggressive type.' A programme of evangelism culminated in an eight days' mission, during which 'several hundreds ... were brought to Christian decision and to the joyous knowledge of Divine forgiveness.' Hughes added the importance of support from neighbouring Methodist churches for the fledgling cause, the predominance of younger men in positions of leadership, and the church's sociable atmosphere. One final 'very important' explanation was adduced: 'the flexibility and comprehensiveness both of the worship and of the creed of Methodism.' In worship, by uniting 'an elaborate and ornate Liturgy with the spontaneity of Dissent', the church was able to appeal to Churchmen ('perhaps a majority of the congregation'), Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Friends, as well as Methodists. In outlook, the only condition for those wishing to join the church was 'a sincere desire to lead a Christlike life'. For Hughes, Methodism was united, not by a creed, in the sense of 'a formulated symbol of our faith', but 'by a blessed agreement of religious experience ... a common consciousness of personal fellowship with a living Saviour.'¹⁴ This might be seen less as 'moral responsibility' than as classic Wesleyan evangelicalism, emphasising a direct and personal experience of faith in Christ, leading to holiness of heart and life as the test of 'true religion' or 'real Christianity'.¹⁵ Such an emphasis on experience need not, of course, conflict with creedal orthodoxy.

Hughes came to Oxford in 1881, therefore, bringing both a conviction of Methodism's potential for growth and a model of mission honed by experience and confirmed by success. Indeed, writing on 'Revival Missions' in *The Christian Miscellany and Family Visitor* in February and March 1881, six months before arriving in Oxford, Hughes described in detail how to organise a mission, and affirmed: 'I would here emphatically enunciate the great paradox or axiom of Revival Missions – *The result is generally determined before the Mission begins*. I have never known an instance of failure where there has been adequate preparation.'¹⁶ In this Hughes was the heir of Finney and Moody, and arguably more explicitly reliant on planning and organisation than earlier generations of Methodists.¹⁷ He came too with the energy and charisma which had a powerful effect on new acquaintances¹⁸ and which had impressed the Oxford Methodists on his first visit to preach in the city in 1879, deputising for the President of the Conference.¹⁹ It remained to be seen how and

¹³ Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 78, 86-87.

¹⁴ Hughes, 'Centres of Spiritual Life'.

¹⁵ See, for example, D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism. True Religion in a Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 79.

¹⁶ Hugh Price Hughes, 'Revival Missions', *Christian Miscellany and Family Visitor* (London: T. Woolmer, 1881), March 1881, 123. Italics in original.

¹⁷ See David Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 9-11, for the 'Methodist approach' from Wesley to the mid-Victorian era; Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1978) for the mid-nineteenth century background; and John Kent, *Holding the Fort* (London: Epworth, 1978) for Moody and his antecedents.

¹⁸ Robinson, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 55-56 (John Bamford Slack), 70 (C. Ensor Walters), 79 (Frederick Atkins). Compare the testimony of E.E. Kellett in Hughes, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 137-41.

¹⁹ Hughes, 'Revival of Oxford Methodism', 34.

whether Hughes' confidence, nurtured in suburban Tottenham and Dulwich, would be realised in the very different setting of a university city and its rural hinterland.

In his poem *Thyrsis*, first published in 1866, Matthew Arnold described Oxford lyrically as 'that sweet City with her dreaming spires', but even as the poem took shape, the city and the county were changing. Nineteenth-century Oxford was a market town, providing goods and services for the countryside and for the university; the University Press was the largest single employer, and there was no significant industrial development before the twentieth century.²⁰ The population of the city, however, which had grown fairly slowly in the first half of the nineteenth century, expanded rapidly thereafter, increasing by 77% between 1851 and 1901. The most substantial increases took place in the suburbanised parishes of St Giles (north), St Clement, Cowley and Headington (east), as well as the densely populated central parishes of St Ebbe and St Thomas.²¹ Oxford's development in this period showed not only suburban growth but also some movement from the city centre to the suburbs, as the colleges and other landowners in the central parishes cleared housing to extend and improve, so that nine of the city's ancient parishes saw a decline in population during the century.²² One study of a neighbourhood in the eastern suburbs, developed from the late 1860s, has shown that most of the heads of household were born in Oxford itself or within twenty miles of the city.²³ This reflected the counter-point to urban growth, which was a migration from the neighbouring villages as agricultural depression hit rural Oxfordshire from the early 1870s. After a period of prosperity and social stability in the era of 'high farming' in the 1850s and 1860s, a combination of adverse weather, poor harvests, livestock diseases and steadily increasing imports of cereals and meat placed landowners and farmers under increasing pressure. Investment in the rural infrastructure dropped; wages were reduced; and farmers turned to machinery to cut labour costs. Agricultural output in the county fell by 20% between 1873 and 1894. Between 1871 and 1911 the agricultural workforce was slashed by 40%, and Oxfordshire farm labourers' wages were among the lowest in the country. Unsurprisingly, therefore, out-migration from the villages was considerable.²⁴ The context for the Methodist mission in Oxford and Oxfordshire in the early 1880s, therefore, was one of urban and suburban growth and prosperity, and rural poverty and decline.

In September 1881, as Hughes took up his new appointment as Superintendent, there were twelve societies in the Oxford Wesleyan Circuit. The strongest, with 280 of the Circuit's 614 members, was based at New Inn Hall Street, in the city centre. Another 120 members were divided between two suburban chapels at Cranham Street, to the north, and St Clement's, to the east. The rest were located in the small market town of Woodstock, and in eight villages to the north and east of the city. In some of the villages, notably Bladon and Headington Quarry, Methodism was firmly

²⁰ C.J. Day, 'Modern Oxford', in Alan Crossley (ed.), *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Oxfordshire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), iv, 213-16.

²¹ William Page (ed.), *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Oxfordshire* (London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1907), ii, 215-24.

²² R.J. Morris, 'The Friars and Paradise: an essay in the building history of Oxford, 1801-1861', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvi (1971), 75.

²³ James Nash, 'The new people of East Oxford: the suburbanisation of Cowley, 1851-91', *Oxoniensia*, lxiii (1998), 125-45.

²⁴ F.M.L. Thompson, 'An anatomy of English agriculture, 1870-1914', in B.A. Holderness and Michael Turner (eds), *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920* (London: Hambledon, 1991), 225, 232, 238; James Nash, 'Aspects of a town in decline: a population study of Burford, Oxfordshire, 1851-1901', University of Oxford DPhil thesis, 2006, 9, 13-14.

established.²⁵ In others, like Horspath, Hampton Poyle and Forest Hill, it was struggling. In still others the Wesleyans had recently withdrawn, in some cases because of successful competition from the United Methodist Free Churches.²⁶

The familiar narrative of mid-nineteenth century Oxford Wesleyanism portrays the denomination as languishing until the arrival of Hughes as Superintendent. Benjamin Gregory, appointed to the Circuit in 1857, 'found Methodism in a truly pitiable condition'. The Circuit was weakened internally by the Reform agitation and the Wesleyans faced determined opposition from the authorities in the university and the diocese.²⁷ Nearly twenty years later, George Maunder, Superintendent from 1876-78, confided to his journal that Oxford Methodism 'is by far the weakest I have ever been connected with.'²⁸ In his 1898 account, Hughes recalled 'an honoured minister' advising him against taking an appointment in Oxford: 'He thought I was "beating" my "head uselessly against a wall," and was about to "throw away" three of the most important years of my life. In his judgment the case of Methodism in Oxford was hopeless.' Hughes's article did much to confirm the narrative of enfeeblement followed by renewal and expansion, beginning with the revival of 1881-82.²⁹

As will be seen below, Hughes's Superintendency did witness remarkable growth across the Oxford Circuit. In his article, however, Hughes acknowledged that the groundwork for the expansion of the 1880s was laid before his arrival. A closer reading of the Circuit's history and records confirms and amplifies this analysis. Several aspects of the fuller picture may be mentioned.

First, under Henry Young and Richard Bell, Superintendents from 1866-72, a determined effort was made first to clear a crippling debt on the New Inn Hall Street chapel and then to promote a scheme 'for the extension of Methodism in this City and neighbourhood' through the construction of an imposing new building.³⁰ The resources, personnel and morale of the New Inn Hall Street society were vital to the strength of the entire Circuit, so paying off the debt on the 1818 chapel and replacing William Jenkins's classical building with 'a sound and elegant representative of Wesleyan Methodism' in fashionable Gothic style promised to give Oxford Methodism a higher profile and to boost the confidence of the Circuit as a whole.³¹ It is telling that not only was the debt quickly cleared and plans for a new building launched, but the Circuit Quarterly Meeting took the initiative in producing an ambitious short-list of ministers deemed suitable to succeed Bell in 1872.³²

²⁵ For Headington Quarry, see Raphael Samuel, "'Quarry roughs": life and labour in Headington Quarry, 1860-1920. An essay in oral history', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Village Life and Labour* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 139-263.

²⁶ The Wesleyans withdrew from Kidlington, where there was a UMFC society, in December 1867, and from Kirtlington in December 1864: Oxford Circuit Stewards' Account Book 1829-69, in Oxford Methodist Circuit Records, Oxfordshire History Centre [hereafter OMCR], NM5/A/F1/3. Work at Charlton on Otmoor was given up in 1880, after years of declining numbers.

²⁷ Benjamin Gregory, *Autobiographical Recollections* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), 407.

²⁸ Thomas F. Maunder, 'Memorials of the Rev. George and Mrs Maunder', *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* (London), June 1881, 401.

²⁹ Hugh Price Hughes, 'The Revival of Oxford Methodism', *Methodist Recorder* (London), Winter Number 1898, 17.

³⁰ OMCR, NM5/A/A3/1, Quarterly Meeting minutes, 29 March 1871. On the building scheme, see Martin Wellings, 'The building of Wesley Memorial Church, Oxford', in *Building the Church (The Chapels Society Journal, volume 2)* (Wetherby: The Chapels Society, 2016), 21-35.

³¹ QM minutes, 28 June 1871.

³² QM minutes, 21 December 1870.

Secondly, as the Quarterly Meeting observed in appealing for Connexional financial support for its building scheme in 1871, the Circuit had already begun to establish outposts in Oxford's developing suburbs.³³ By summer 1871 two classes were meeting in the northern suburb of Jericho; six months later there was a class in Botley, to the west of the city centre; by summer 1873 one of the Circuit's most gifted younger lay leaders, James Nix, had been seconded to lead a class on the Cowley Road, to the east.³⁴ Over the next fifteen years these initiatives experienced mixed fortunes. The Botley class was recorded as 'extinct' in September 1876,³⁵ but in Jericho and St Clement's the Wesleyan work grew. The Jericho class moved from a private house in Albert Street to a purpose-built chapel in Cranham Street, opened in 1873 and subsequently extended.³⁶ In East Oxford a young grocer, Walter Slaughter, was the driving force behind a Sunday school and a society which moved into an ex-Primitive Methodist chapel in Alma Place, off the Cowley Road.³⁷ By the time Hughes arrived in Oxford, there were 66 members at Cranham Street and 54 at St Clement's.³⁸

Thirdly, efforts were made to strengthen Wesleyan societies in the villages around Oxford. These endeavours touched two recurring rhythms of Methodist life: the spiritual heights of revival and the severely practical matter of property. Experiences of revival, with surges in membership followed by a gradual ebbing of support, punctuate the records. Meanwhile societies raised funds to improve their buildings, spent years paying off debts, and then embarked on a fresh round of redecoration or extension. In the mid-1870s there was modest growth at Bladon and Coombe, while in March 1879 Tackley, with sixteen members, recorded an additional seventeen people admitted as members on trial, and the membership climbed to 31 a year later.³⁹ Wootton cleared its chapel debt in 1872; Headington Quarry added a new schoolroom in 1874; in 1877 the Bladon society opened a new chapel, at a cost of £600.⁴⁰ As the Circuit's Chapel Secretary, James Nix was active as a promoter of new schemes and a campaigner to reduce debts on old ones.

Fourthly, the Circuit made two innovations in mission. The first, a fairly traditional step, was to experiment with an additional minister, located not in the city centre but at Woodstock. The idea of placing a minister at Woodstock was mooted as early as 1867, but in 1872 it was agreed that, if the staff remained two, both should continue to reside in the city.⁴¹ Two years later, however, the Quarterly Meeting agreed to apply for a third minister, to work in Woodstock, Bladon, Coombe, Wootton and Tackley. This additional post was to be funded partly by a Connexional Home Mission grant and partly by hypothecating the assessments raised from those five places.⁴² The role of successive Home Missionary ministers in stimulating increasing membership and building projects in

³³ QM minutes, 29 March 1871.

³⁴ OMCR, NM5/A/A2/5, Circuit Schedule Book, June 1871, December 1871, June 1873.

³⁵ Schedule Book, September 1876.

³⁶ OMCR, NM5/A/MS1/1, 'Methodism in Oxford by James Nix', f 91 (also printed in the *Oxford Circuit Magazine*, September 1933).

³⁷ John Boylan, *Cowley Road Methodist Church Centre Oxford. Centenary 1904-2004* (Oxford: Cowley Road Methodist Church Centre, 2004), 1-3.

³⁸ Schedule Book, September 1881.

³⁹ Schedule Book, March 1879 and March 1880.

⁴⁰ 'Methodism in Oxford', ff 77-81.

⁴¹ QM minutes, 27 March 1867; 19 July 1872.

⁴² QM minutes, 25 March 1874.

the northern part of the Circuit remains to be established in detail, but it is suggestive that growth and development took place in all these societies between 1874 and 1887.⁴³

The other innovation took the form of a mission in the city in the spring of 1881. Special services were not unusual in Wesleyanism, but the 1881 campaign was different because it was led by a visiting lay evangelist, Robinson Watson, and was accompanied by intensive advertising.⁴⁴ The Quarterly Meeting, assembling a fortnight after Watson's fourteen day mission, recorded its gratitude for 'the eminent success which by God's blessing has attended the special services ... resulting in such large accessions to the Church ...'⁴⁵ There were some 300 inquirers, and over the next two quarters the membership at New Inn Hall Street rose from 218 to 280, with a large group of members-on-trial continuing to join the classes through the summer and autumn.⁴⁶ Watson's mission in March 1881 created a very favourable environment for the arrival of Hugh Price Hughes six months later, providing recent evangelistic experience, enthusiasm, confidence and a body of eager workers.

Six elements of Hughes' strategy may be identified. First, building on the enthusiasm generated by Watson's revival and deploying his own experience from Tottenham and Dulwich, Hughes sought to mobilise and motivate the Circuit's membership in support of missional ventures. Thus Watson's converts were organised into mission bands to promote evangelism and enhance the work of the Local Preachers; spiritual conventions were held to enthuse class leaders, society stewards and Sunday school teachers; small gatherings of wealthy individuals were convened to elicit financial backing for Hughes's projects. Hughes also saw potential for outreach in the small group of Methodist students at the university, and enlisted their support in opening and staffing a Mission Room in Catherine Street, in a poorer district of East Oxford.⁴⁷

Secondly, well-organised and well-publicised missions were held across the Circuit. At his first Quarterly Meeting Hughes 'mentioned that he purposed holding special Evangelistic Services in every Chapel throughout the Circuit at the commencement of the ensuing year.'⁴⁸ A special meeting of Local Preachers in May 1882 planned open-air services on successive Sundays in the summer months, assigning a team of preachers to each place. A year later, in preparation for the summer 1883 campaign, arrangements were made to print 10,000 hymn sheets for these services.⁴⁹ In the city, the New Inn Hall Street congregation marched through the city centre to an open-air service in a field near Magdalen College. Hughes led an eight-day mission in the city, preceded by systematic house-to-house canvassing, and this method was then extended to the villages.⁵⁰

⁴³ A resolution of thanks to the Rev. A. Martin for his work at Woodstock appeared in the QM minutes, 23 December 1880.

⁴⁴ 'Methodism in Oxford', f 41, 42 (and *Oxford Circuit Magazine*, February 1934); 'Revival Intelligence', *Methodist Recorder*, 18 March 1881, 164; 'Mr Robinson Watson's Services', *Oxford Chronicle*, 12 March 1881, 5.

⁴⁵ QM minutes, 23 March 1881.

⁴⁶ *Oxford Circuit Magazine*, February 1934; Schedule Book, March, June and September 1881.

⁴⁷ Hughes, 'Revival of Oxford Methodism', 17-18; QM minutes, 28 September 1881; 'Methodism in Oxford', n.p.; Oxley, *Wesley Memorial Church*, 80-81; Minutes of the Wesley Guild, Oxford Methodist Circuit Archives, Oxfordshire History Centre, NM5/F1/A1/1, n.p.

⁴⁸ QM minutes, 28 September 1881.

⁴⁹ OMCR, NM5/A/A4/2, Local Preachers' Meeting minutes, 10 May 1882 and 9 April 1883.

⁵⁰ Hughes, 'Revival of Oxford Methodism', 19.

Thirdly, steps were taken to strengthen the Methodist presence in the suburbs by building three new chapels. One, a fairly modest building in New Hinksey, opened in July 1882, planted a Wesleyan cause in a new neighbourhood to the south of the city centre. The other projects provided improved facilities for the existing societies in Jericho and St Clement's. Although opened in the same year (1883), and developed as part of the same mission to the suburbs, the new buildings were carefully and consciously tailored to their respective neighbourhoods. The William Street chapel in East Oxford, designed by the local architect J.C. Gray, was planned as 'a large Mission Room', suitable for the artisan population of St Clement's and the Cowley Road. In Walton Street, close to the affluent North Oxford suburbs, Hughes engaged Thomas Mullett Ellis, ARIBA, Kingswood-educated and London-based, to produce a building 'designedly artistic in its character' and suitable for a 'service musical and liturgical'. Mullett Ellis, fresh from a commission to build a Wesleyan chapel on Malta, designed a substantial red-brick building, 'Gothic of the early English period', at a cost of £3000, almost four times as much as the William Street Mission Room.⁵¹

Fourthly, Hughes sought to extend Methodist work in the villages as well as in the city. The special Local Preachers' meeting in May 1882 drew up a list of seven villages where 'open-air work should be commenced'. A new list was presented in April 1884, with groups of preachers appointed for the summer months and a note that 'Mr Railton should render service with a cornet.'⁵² In 1898 Hughes described the 'flying visits' by his 'Gospel chariots', recalling that '[a]s the result ... several additional chapels have been erected since I left the Circuit.'⁵³ Hughes left a new society and chapel at Eynsham, and a new society at Beckley, and re-established a Wesleyan presence at Charlton. In the next six years the Circuit developed this initiative further in other villages to the east and south of the city, building chapels at Garsington and Cuddesdon.⁵⁴

Fifthly, Hughes reached out across denominational divides. A generation earlier, Oxford Methodism had been badly damaged by the controversies over Wesleyan Reform, losing preachers, members and chapels to what became the United Methodist Free Churches. The city centre UMFC chapel was a stone's throw from the Wesleyan chapel, and Hughes boldly suggested a rapprochement. As a community, the UMFC did not accept Hughes' overtures, but Robert Buckell, one of the most dynamic younger leaders of the UMFC, and a rising star in Oxford's municipal politics, switched allegiance to the Wesleys.⁵⁵ Hughes also cultivated links with the Nonconformist Churches, bringing representatives of other denominations into his newly formed student Wesley Guild.

Sixthly, Hughes worked to raise the profile of Wesleyan Methodism in the city and the university. There were limits to what could be achieved in the closed world of the university: Dorothea Price Hughes recalled that her father read the books of G.J. Romanes and R.L. Nettleship, '[b]ut he did not know them to speak to any more than he knew Max Müller and Jowett.'⁵⁶ T.H. Green, Whyte's

⁵¹ 'Alterations and improvements in Oxford', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 14 October 1882; Hughes, 'Revival of Oxford Methodism', 18; 'The New Wesleyan Chapel, Walton Street', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 26 May 1883, 'Alterations and improvements in Oxford', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 13 October 1883. The William Street chapel cost a mere £850.

⁵² LP minutes, 10 May 1882 and 16 April 1884.

⁵³ Hughes, 'Revival of Oxford Methodism', 20.

⁵⁴ QM minutes, 30 June 1885 and 31 March 1886 (Garsington); 7 July 1886 (Cuddesdon).

⁵⁵ Hughes, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 147-48; LP Minutes, 29 March 1882.

⁵⁶ Hughes, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 133.

Professor of Moral Philosophy, became a valued friend, until his death in March 1882.⁵⁷ And Hughes shared a platform with Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College, correcting Pattison's low estimate of the strength of Methodism.⁵⁸ Methodist influence in the university remained small, but it had a much stronger presence in the city, with leading representatives in business and civic life.

Hughes's three-year ministry in Oxford became the stuff of Wesleyan legend. The methods learned at Barry Road were applied in Oxford, with Hughes's characteristic energy and verve. To the question: 'Well, what did you think of Hughes when he was here?' it was reported that a local Methodist replied: 'Think? ... [h]e did not give us any time to think. We had not the breath ...'⁵⁹ This reflection captured Hughes' personal impact: methods aside, Hughes' boundless confidence, sheer charisma and commitment to 'Christian audacity' were crucial in winning support and carrying projects forward. In his unpublished history of Oxford Methodism, compiled in the 1890s, James Nix celebrated Hughes' achievements, contrasting his 'spirit of daring adventure' with his 'plodding and painstaking' predecessor Charles Floyd.⁶⁰ Floyd had organised the Watson mission of 1881, and had made tentative plans for a new chapel in North Oxford, but it was Hughes' dynamism that turned potential into achievement. The lasting impact may be seen in at least two respects.

First, the Oxford Circuit was significantly strengthened, and the confidence and momentum generated in the early 1880s continued into the twentieth century. With small fluctuations, the membership figures held up well, although recruitment of new members sometimes struggled to keep pace with removals and resignations, so that in 1885-86, for example, 133 new members were received, and 26 moved into the circuit, but 71 left the area, 74 ceased to be members and 11 died, leaving a net increase of just 3.⁶¹ Hughes' strategic decision to pay attention to the villages as well as the city bore fruit in circuit initiatives to fund new chapels at Islip, Beckley, Coombe, Wootton and New Headington in the 1880s and 1890s;⁶² meanwhile, the modest mission room in William Street was replaced in 1904 by a commanding new chapel on the Cowley Road.⁶³ The corps of Local Preachers continued to grow; open-air services were held in the city and in the villages in the summer months; and special missions were organised.⁶⁴ By the end of the century there was an active Nonconformist Council (later Free Church Council) in the city, with close ties to the city council as well as the business community; and Wesleyans were well-represented in every sphere of Oxford's commercial, philanthropic and political life.

Secondly, the Oxford experience was important for Hugh Price Hughes himself. A striking success in his first appointment as a Superintendent vindicated his confidence, strengthened his reputation and confirmed the effectiveness of his missionary methods. Impressed by the results in Oxford, the Wesleyan Conference of 1883 seconded Hughes to lead revival missions around the country, and this further enhanced his prestige, so that he was invited to return to London in 1884, as

⁵⁷ Ibid., 134-35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 161-62.

⁵⁹ Hughes, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 136.

⁶⁰ Nix history, f 40; *Oxford Circuit Magazine*, September 1936 (cutting in the Nix collection).

⁶¹ QM minutes, 31 March 1886.

⁶² Ibid., 30 December 1885 (Islip and Beckley), 30 March 1887 (Wootton and New Headington); the Coombe chapel was replaced by a new building in 1893.

⁶³ Boylan, *Cowley Road Methodist Church Centre*. The architect, Stephen Salter, FRIBA, belonged to a prominent Oxford Wesleyan family.

⁶⁴ For example, QM minutes, 25 March 1885.

Superintendent of the wealthy and influential Brixton Hill Circuit.⁶⁵ One of Hughes' most effective lieutenants in Oxford, Josiah Nix, went with him first to Brixton Hill, and then to the West London Mission.⁶⁶

Dorothea Price Hughes maintained that Oxford made her father more aware of 'the defects of contemporary Nonconformity' and that it stimulated him to a broader conception of both Church and State.⁶⁷ Similar reflections drew others to leave Methodism for the Church of England, but Hughes' vision of the Church was broader than Anglicanism, and he was energised to work for Methodist and Free Church union, for the sake of evangelism and social transformation. To these years as well may be ascribed Hughes' turn to the insights of Christian socialism and willingness to criticise classical political economy.⁶⁸ The working out of these themes may be seen in the editorial approach of the *Methodist Times*, which Hughes launched in 1885, and in the 'Forward Movement', and in the ecumenical explorations of the 1890s through the Grindelwald Conferences and the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches.⁶⁹

Hughes' purpose in describing 'the revival of Oxford Methodism' in the winter of 1898 was to encourage and to exhort contemporary Wesleyans to 'do on a gigantic, national scale, both financially and spiritually, what by the wonderful grace of God was achieved a few years ago in the Oxford Circuit.'⁷⁰ Hughes' vision was the revival of the Church and the transformation of society, and he put the Oxford story, painted with bold, confident strokes, to the service of that vision, hoping to repeat nationwide what had been accomplished in Oxford. His programme for his Presidential year centred on Special District Conventions, gathering ministers, preachers and office-holders to meetings for prayer and renewal as a springboard for revival. Meanwhile, the Twentieth Century Fund aimed to raise a million guineas from a million Methodists, equipping the Connexion for mission. The outcomes fell short of Hughes' hopes. The District Conventions drew crowds, and the Twentieth Century Fund displayed the impressive machinery of the Connexion and the prosperity of the Wesleyan laity, but neither endeavour ignited revival. Political issues, particularly the war which broke out in South Africa in 1899 and the agonising over the response to the government's education proposals from 1901, fractured Free Church unity and strained relationships within Wesleyanism. Hughes' sudden death in November 1902 found his agenda incomplete, although his example and influence lived on.⁷¹

Undoubtedly Hugh Price Hughes made a huge impact in Oxford, both by his personality and by his methods, and the Oxford experience was formative for Hughes' subsequent approach to ministry and mission. However, it should not be forgotten that the conditions were propitious for Hughes in autumn 1881, and that his success was built upon the preparatory work of others. For Hughes himself, revival rested not on a single individual, but on a team of leaders and workers. Perhaps the

⁶⁵ Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 102-03, 117.

⁶⁶ For Josiah Nix (1847-1924), see *Methodist Recorder*, 3 April 1924, 4; 10 April 1924, 7; Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 118.

⁶⁷ Hughes, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 160-61.

⁶⁸ Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 110-14.

⁶⁹ Stella M. Wood, 'Nonconformity, Theology, and Reunion, c. 1870-1910', Oxford DPhil diss. 1995; Christopher Oldstone-Moore, 'The forgotten origins of the ecumenical movement in England: the Grindelwald Conferences, 1892-95', *Church History* 70:1 (March 2001), 73-97.

⁷⁰ Hughes, 'The Revival of Oxford Methodism', 48.

⁷¹ Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 316, 320, 333-34.

failure of the 1898 article on Oxford Methodism to renew and extend the experience of 1881-84 showed that Hughes' model of revival placed too much confidence in the efficacy of preparation, under-estimated the importance of context, contingency and circumstances, and paid insufficient attention to the mysterious nature of the work of the Spirit.