



‘Methodism Alive’: Mass Observation’s Worktown Perspective

Clive Field

Abstract: This paper explores the potential of the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex for studying the history of Methodism in Bolton (aka ‘Worktown’) during the middle third of the twentieth century, with particular reference to the years 1937–40 and 1960, demonstrating its value for recording the lived experience of Methodism. An appendix contains three key documents, two of them relating to the work of the Victoria Hall in the Bolton Mission circuit, which was much lauded by Mass Observation.

Keywords: Bolton • Mass Observation • Methodism • Victoria Hall • Worktown

Introduction

With its Puritan tradition (it was often described as the ‘Geneva of the North’)¹, it is unsurprising that Bolton should have developed as a major centre of Methodism. The first Methodist society in the town was formed by John Bennet as early as 1747, while John Wesley made the first of his many visits in 1748 when he preached at the market cross, albeit not without encountering some opposition. A chapel was opened in 1751, and, notwithstanding Bennet’s secession, the work prospered to the extent that Bolton had become the head of a circuit by 1784. During the nineteenth century, there was a rapid expansion in Bolton’s population, largely driven by industrialisation, especially in textiles but also coal and engineering, and Methodism expanded accordingly.

The Wesleyans eventually created five circuits, including the Bolton Mission, the local expression of the Forward Movement; this was initially based at the Ridgway Gates chapel, but subsequently replaced by the Victoria Hall (1900) and the Kings Hall (1907). Non-Wesleyan Methodist denominations likewise established a permanent presence in the town, successively the Methodist New Connexion, Independent Methodists, Primitive Methodists, and the several strands that ultimately came together as the United Methodist Free Churches. Even the West Country Bible Christians made a belated and fleeting appearance (from 1889, opening a chapel in 1891). By 1932, at the time of Methodist union, besides the five Wesleyan circuits, there were two Primitive Methodist and three United Methodist ones. The aggregate membership was 7,403, some of whom were in societies beyond the boundaries of the county borough of Bolton proper.²

¹ This reference, to the Swiss city that was the cradle of Calvinism, can be traced to the years of the First English Civil War in the early 1640s, when Bolton was a strongly Parliamentary outpost in an otherwise staunchly Royalist region.

² Regrettably, there is no modern history of Methodism in Bolton. However, there are some older titles as well as histories of individual churches, the principal ones being listed in Clive D. Field, *Methodism in Great Britain and Ireland: A Select Bibliography of Published Local Histories* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, 2022), 145–8.

As in the connexion at large, the process of administrative rationalisation following the 1932 union was slow. For the first three years, there appear to have been no changes in the town's ten circuits. Then, in 1935, the ex-Wesleyan Park Street circuit was expanded to incorporate several ex-Primitive Methodist and ex-United Methodist churches, and two ex United Methodist circuits (Hanover and St George's Road) were dissolved. Three years later, the final ex-United Methodist circuit (Albert Place) was dissolved, leaving Bolton with seven circuits, one amalgamated (Park Street), four ex-Wesleyan (Bridge Street, Wesley, Bolton Mission, and Farnworth), and two ex-Primitive Methodist (Higher Bridge Street and Moor Lane). These seven circuits had a combined membership of 6,906 in 1937, 7 per cent less than in 1932. Membership in the county borough alone must have been just over 6,000.

The year 1937 is significant in that it witnessed the birth of the social research organisation Mass Observation (MO) and the opening in March that year of one of its two research units, at 85 Davenport Street, Bolton. The latter was under the direction of Tom Harrisson, MO's co-founder (the other co-founder was Charles Madge, who headed up the sister centre in London). Using primarily qualitative methods, Harrisson set out to investigate the anthropology of everyday life in Bolton (disguised in MO's publicity as 'Northtown' and later as 'Worktown'), with particular reference to the public house, leisure, politics, and religion. Books were planned on each of these themes, but only *The Pub and the People* (1943) was eventually published. Nevertheless, a vast treasure-trove of raw material, manuscript and typescript, was assembled and eventually deposited at the University of Sussex special collections in 1975. This Mass Observation Archive (MOA) is now accessible at The Keep, Brighton, with a significant proportion (including the entire Worktown Collection) also available through subscribing academic libraries as *Mass Observation Online*.³ The current paper highlights the material in MOA that historians of Bolton Methodism may find helpful, not least in illuminating the lived experience of the town's Methodists at that time.

Bolton Methodism, 1937–38

MO's Bolton unit was staffed by a mixture of 'paid' observers (they mostly received board, lodging, and living expenses rather than wages) and volunteers (especially over the summer). The 42-year-old Joseph L. Wilcock ('Brother Joe') was recruited to co-ordinate the team working on the religion sub-project, which contained individuals from academic and creative backgrounds, with varying degrees of religious commitment and understanding. Wilcock's own credentials comprised Lancashire working-class roots and an ability to engage with Bolton's local religious leaders and win their confidence, 'both as a social worker and as a Christian'. His previous career had included spells as a 'tramp preacher' and warden of St Christopher's hostel for destitute young boys in the East End of London, but, leaving his wife behind in Hornsea, he had moved to Bolton in search of employment. He had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the non-believer Harrisson, whom he feared might 'make some blasphemous use of the material'. For his part, Harrisson judged Wilcock 'a far-out fundamentalist' who was easily taken in by religious sentimentality.⁴

MO's research methods were not always very systematic and were sometimes, to modern eyes, idiosyncratic. However, it was readily understood that a logical first step in the religion sub-project was to prepare a list of all the places of worship in Bolton, which was lacking from contemporaneous local directories. **Document A** synthesises MO's findings in respect of Methodist churches in the county borough of Bolton in 1937–38. Including Independent Methodists, there were forty-four of them, equivalent to 28 per cent of all places of worship in the town, and more than the number belonging to the Church of England (thirty-eight). Total sittings in these Methodist churches were 22,000, sufficient to accommodate one in eight of Bolton's estimated population of 173,000 in 1937.

With its aversion to statistical techniques, rather paradoxical for an organisation that was driven after the Second World War into earning its living from quantitative market research, MO made no attempt to follow the

³ The standard history of MO is James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937–1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and the standard biography of Harrisson is Judith M. Heimann, *The Most Offending Soul Alive: Tom Harrisson and his Remarkable Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999). There are accounts of MO's religion research in Bolton in Clive D. Field, 'Religion in Worktown: Anatomy of a Mass-Observation Sub-project', *Northern History*, 53, no. 1 (2016): 116–37 and David Hall, *Worktown: The Astonishing Story of the Birth of Mass-Observation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2015), 189–203.

⁴ For a fuller description of MO's religion team, see Field, 'Religion in Worktown', 117–19.

lead of other British community studies of the period, such as Seebohm Rowntree's in York in 1935,⁵ in organising a census of church attendance. Although MO eventually offered an estimate of 30,000 churchgoers in Bolton, 12,000 of whom were Catholics,⁶ it was unable to break down the Protestant share of 18,000 into its constituent denominations. Since the Methodist Church did not begin to enumerate its worshippers until 1972, the aggregate size of its congregations in Bolton in 1937–38 must remain uncertain, albeit figures for isolated individual services were recorded in undertaking observations at particular churches.

MO did not devote equal effort to investigating each of Methodism's forty-four places of worship in 1937–38. Examination of the MOA online catalogue and of the digitised content in *Mass Observation Online* suggests that, of 155 Methodist-related documents in the Worktown Collection,⁷ handwritten or typed by MO personnel between March 1937 and June 1938, sixty-six concerned the Victoria Hall on Knowsley Street, forty-nine of them authored by Wilcock. The Victoria Hall was the headquarters of the Bolton Mission and the nearest that Bolton had to a cathedral-like place of worship at that time.⁸ The hall's minister, as well as the mission's superintendent, between 1927 and 1939 was Thomas Hannah, whom Wilcock had first encountered when he interviewed him on 23 December 1937. Hannah, who came across to Wilcock as 'cold to approach, perhaps shy, and is gruff to disguise it', had initially been cautious about co-operating with MO, fearing 'there is a possible chance of our saying something and being misquoted, misrepresented ... we feel that the Spirit is not something that can be measured'. However, Hannah relented somewhat and agreed to give Wilcock 'the run of the place' for one week early in the New Year, to enable him to engage with the full range of the Victoria Hall's activities.⁹ Document B tabulates Wilcock's visitation on 15–23 January 1938, showing the daily programme and referencing the reports on events that Wilcock wrote, varying in length from one page to twenty or so pages. In August 1938, on the eve of his departure from Bolton, Wilcock also penned 'Methodism alive', transcribed as Document C, a summative assessment of his impressions of the Victoria Hall, singing its praises.^{10,11} Interestingly, Wilcock said little about the other half of the Bolton Mission, the Kings Hall on Bradshawgate, which was the subject of just five reports, only two of them by Wilcock himself.

It is easy to see why Wilcock was so impressed by the scale and range of the Victoria Hall's regular programme, and particularly by the large numbers of people drawn to the Saturday evening concerts (continued until 1941) and the Sunday evening services and, to a lesser extent, the women's meeting and Sunday school. Additionally, the hall hosted special events for local Methodism and the town, one example being the commemoration on 24 May 1938 of the bicentenary of John Wesley's 'conversion', which was chaired by Bolton's then mayor (who was a Methodist himself) and allegedly attended by 2,400 people.¹² At the same time, there can be little doubt that Wilcock viewed the Victoria Hall through rose-tinted spectacles, and that he allocated a disproportionate amount of his and MO's time to charting its work. After all, the Bolton Mission accounted for only one-fifth of Methodist membership in the town in 1937. In fact, in interviews with MO, Methodist ministers from other Bolton circuits, such as Robert Hasler and Hugh Brook of the Bridge Street circuit, privately voiced some criticism of the Victoria Hall for the 'hurt' that it inflicted on other Methodist churches in the town, denuding them of some of their best leaders and further weakening the fragile position of the already decaying town centre causes, which were only being kept open 'for sentimental reasons'.¹³ Hannah was very sensitive to any suggestion that his congregation was recruited in part from other Methodist churches.¹⁴

⁵ B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York* (London: Longmans, Green, 1941), 417–26, 531.

⁶ MO, *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), 325.

⁷ This figure excludes Methodist printed ephemera, such as orders of service and circuit plans, some of which are preserved in the Worktown Collection. It should also be noted that, according to a list of services and events that were observed by MO during this period, at [Brighton, The Keep, Mass Observation Archive], SxMOA1/5/5/20/A/4, observations were also made at five additional events for which no reports are extant in the Worktown Collection.

⁸ Daniel Tomkins, *Mission Accomplished: The Story of the First 100 Years of the Bolton Methodist Mission* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1997); Angela Connelly, 'Methodist Central Halls as Public Sacred Space' (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2010), 205–32.

⁹ SxMOA1/5/5/21/C/11. An overview of the hall's staffing can be found in SxMOA1/5/5/21/E/22.

¹⁰ To the best of the author's knowledge, this is only the second Methodist-related document in MOA to have been transcribed and published in full, the other being from Worcester in 1940, to be found in Clive D. Field, 'Observing Methodist Worship: Worcester, 1940 and 1973', in *Celebrating 50 Golden Years of the Wesley Historical Society—West Midlands Methodist History Society, 1965–2015*, eds. Donald Ryan, Dorothy Graham, Richard Ratcliffe, and Diane Webb ([Wolverhampton]: West Midlands Methodist History Society, 2016), 98–110 at 100–5.

¹¹ SxMOA1/5/5/17/B/24.

¹² Respectively, SxMOA1/5/5/21/B/1, SxMOA1/5/5/21/C/4.

¹³ SxMOA1/5/5/21/C/11.

¹⁴ In total, therefore, including the Victoria Hall, Wilcock undertook 46 per cent of Methodist observations, compared with 41 per cent of all church observations in Bolton; Field, 'Religion in Worktown', 123.

All but four of the eighty-nine remaining Methodist-related documents in the Worktown Collection, and originated between March 1937 and June 1938, concerned thirty-one individual Methodist churches besides the Victoria Hall. Of these, thirteen were ex-Wesleyan Methodist, six ex-Primitive Methodist, four ex-United Methodist, seven Independent Methodist, and one uncertain. Wilcock compiled at least twenty-two of the eighty-nine reports,¹⁵ the majority being the work of other observers (including Harrisson).

Twenty-four of the thirty-one churches had three or fewer observations each, Bridge Street (ex-Wesleyan Methodist) and St George's Road (ex-United Methodist) having most, ten apiece. The subject matter of these documents was diverse. Although descriptions of ordinary services were numerous, there was good coverage of special services, including, as well as religious festivals such as Easter and Christmas, the annual Sunday school 'sermons' that were such a tradition of the North-West and the sportsmen's services which became a feature of the inter-war religious scene.¹⁶ Other events observed included concerts, plays, and bazaars. Of the few interviews conducted with local Methodist ministers, the most informative was probably that with Hasler on 6 January 1938, not least for his counsel against the Church entering into competition with cinemas, a strategy which he detected was 'all the rage now', as a means of countering the slide towards secularisation.¹⁷ MO's attempts to capture the direct voice of the laity, through a life histories stream of the religion sub-project, were a conspicuous failure, albeit several interesting submissions were made by past and present members of Harvey Street Primitive Methodist Church, including accounts of its Christian Endeavour society, football club, and concerts.¹⁸

Bolton Methodism, 1939–40

The religion sub-project had begun to run out of steam by early summer 1938 and was disrupted by changes in personnel. Funding for Wilcock's post had ended by this stage, and he moved to London, working initially for the Labour Party in the capital and later with Norwegian sailors in Newcastle. Furthermore, in September and October 1938, Harrisson and Madge swapped roles, partly in consequence of a crisis in Madge's personal life, Harrisson relocating to London and Madge to Bolton to take charge of the Worktown study. However, Madge's preoccupation was with a new project on spending and saving, the intended subject of a fifth Worktown book, rather than with the four existing strands of Worktown research (among them religion), and following its completion in autumn 1939 he originally intended to close down the Davenport Street unit altogether. Then the war intervened, bringing new research priorities (not least in connection with MO's contracts with the Ministry of Information), so the Bolton operation was eventually kept open until August 1940, although conscription of its observers (and their non-replacement) impeded its work.

This temporary reprieve for the Worktown project facilitated a minor revival of the religion sub-project at the hands of Brian Allwood, with reference to the impact on the town's religious life of the first months of the Second World War,¹⁹ albeit the specifically Methodist element of his investigations was fairly limited. Three Methodist ministers were interviewed, two mostly about Moral Re-Armament,²⁰ the most wide-ranging being with Hasler of the Bridge Street circuit on 19 December 1939. Speaking of Britain's entry into the war, Hasler was convinced 'we did the right thing, in view of what seemed likely to happen. The bulk of people in my congregation think so too. There are a few COs [Conscientious Objectors] and pacifists, but they're in a very small minority. I think their attitude is a hopeless one.' He described Hitler as 'like a pirate. You've got to check him.' Within his own church, Hasler noted that fewer social activities had taken place since the war started, and that the reduced tram and bus service on Sunday mornings had made it more difficult for some people to attend worship. Overall, however,

¹⁵ Bolton Methodist examples can be found at SxMOA1/5/5/25/B/1, SxMOA1/5/5/25/B/4, and SxMOA1/5/5/25/B/9. For the development of the genre, see Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the Rise of Sport in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 183–9.

¹⁶ SxMOA1/5/5/21/B/1. Cf. Field, 'Religion in Worktown', 122.

¹⁷ SxMOA1/5/5/17/B/2, SxMOA1/5/5/17/B/3, SxMOA1/5/5/17/B/4, SxMOA1/5/5/17/B/5, SxMOA1/5/5/19/D/1.

¹⁸ Clive D. Field, 'Mass Observation, Religion, and the Second World War: when "Cooper's Snoopers" Caught the Spirit', in *British Christianity and the Second World War*, eds. Michael Snape and Stuart Bell (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2023), 99–116 at 103–4.

¹⁹ SxMOA1/5/5/21/B/11, SxMOA1/5/5/21/B/15.

²⁰ SxMOA1/5/5/21/B/8.

attendances had 'fluctuated a bit, but they are more or less the same now as they were'.²¹ More generally, MO intermittently enumerated Sunday morning congregations at five churches of the principal denominations in Bolton between September 1939 and July 1940, including ten Methodist ones. The first three counts were at St Georges Road followed by seven at the Victoria Hall, where attendances dipped from 127 on 5 November and 129 on 12 November 1939 to 91 on 9 June and 90 on 23 June 1940, perhaps in line with the traditional mid-summer trough.²²

Bolton Methodism, 1960

After mid-summer 1940, when this second phase of the Worktown study abruptly concluded, MO's fieldwork in Bolton was only carried out on an *ad hoc* basis. Twenty years were to pass before the threads of 1937–40 were briefly picked up in a restudy of Bolton undertaken by Harrison (then on leave from his post as curator of the Sarawak Museum in Borneo) and some of his former MO associates during July and the first half of August 1960. Much of the spadework for the religious strand was carried out by Nell Umney, while Celia Fremlin and Harrison were responsible for writing the religion chapter in the book arising from the restudy.²³ MO recorded (but generally did not name) twenty-six Methodist chapels in 1960, although there were in fact twenty-eight in the county borough, according to the official Methodist list for that year,²⁴ with an estimated membership of 3,400 (reduced by 43 per cent since 1937–38).²⁴ The Methodist Church had ten fewer places of worship, 5,500 fewer sittings, and three fewer circuits in the town than in 1937–38,²⁵ having started to implement a programme of rationalisation consequent on the union of the three main branches of Methodism in 1932. The most significant of the closures was of the 1,370-seater Kings Hall on Bradshawgate in 1958. Joseph Needham, superintendent minister of the Bolton (Wesley) circuit, made it plain to MO that there was still much more to be done in this regard and bemoaned the stubbornness of the 'old guard' in resisting amalgamations.²⁶ The foregoing Methodist figures excluded the Independent Methodist Churches, which had six places of worship according to a contemporaneous local directory, one more than identified by MO,²⁷ with 310 members.²⁸

The 1960 restudy of Bolton religion generated only six significant Methodist-related manuscript/typescript documents. Two were observations of services, one in the morning at the Victoria Hall (which was led by a deaconess, and expertly reported upon by Julian Trevelyan) and the other in the evening at St Georges Road.²⁹ On the whole, however, the interviews conducted by Umney with three Methodist ministers were more enlightening, they being Needham of the Bolton (Wesley) circuit and Donald Smethurst and Kenneth Lawton of the Bolton (Bridge Street) circuit.³⁰ According to their testimonies, Methodism in the town was struggling. This was particularly evident in terms of recruitment of people, both to Sunday schools and the Church. As Smethurst lamented: 'the small family of today does not provide fodder for Sunday school. The hard core of the congregation are past child bearing age.' Adult Sunday schools, which had traditionally served as 'a social centre' (Smethurst) or 'a political debating society' (Lawton) for men were equally losing ground. Three root causes of declension were identified: the much increased availability of motor cars, enabling family Sunday outings and, according to Smethurst, making it difficult to find local preachers;³¹ more widespread ownership of television sets in the home, especially drawing away the middle-aged from church; and outward migration from the town centre, either to Bolton's suburbs (with their new council estates or private housing developments) or to other places (at Beverley Road Independent Methodist Church, a

²¹ SxMOA1/1/5/3/22, SxMOA1/2/47/1/D/1, SxMOA1/2/47/2/C/1, SxMOA1/5/5/23/D/3, SxMOA1/5/5/23/D/37, SxMOA1/5/17/52/A/47, SxMOA1/5/17/52/L/12. 23 June would probably have immediately preceded 'Bolton Holidays' or 'Wakes Weeks', the first of which normally began on the last Friday of June and ran into the first week of July.

²² Tom Harrison, *Britain Revisited* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961), 46–84.

²³ *Methodist Church Department for Chapel Affairs: Report for 1963* (Manchester: the Department, 1963), 41.

²⁴ *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, 1961* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1961), 126.

²⁵ Both the ex-Primitive Methodist circuits (Higher Bridge Street and Moor Lane) had been dissolved by this point.

²⁶ SxMOA1/5/19/64/F/30.

²⁷ *Allison's Street Directory of Bolton* (1958), 187–91.

²⁸ *Independent Methodist Churches Year Book for 1962–1963* (Wigan: Independent Methodist Churches Book Room, [1962]), S-4.

²⁹ Respectively, SxMOA1/5/19/64/F/17 and SxMOA1/5/19/64/F/23.

³⁰ Respectively, SxMOA1/5/19/64/F/30; SxMOA1/5/19/64/F/27 and SxMOA1/5/19/64/F/36; SxMOA1/5/19/65/C/1.

³¹ More positively, Lawton reported one instance where a fleet of cars driven by church workers was being used to ferry in thirty children from non-churchgoing families. Cf. Harrison, *Britain Revisited*, 74–5.

major challenge was 'the fact that the younger members leave the town after marriage'.³² On the positive side, the ministers interviewed welcomed the new era in church finance, with a switch to enhanced levels of individual covenanted giving,³³ and even a rise in ministerial stipends.

Conclusion

The MOA is a rich source of information about one phase in the history of Methodism in Bolton, and an archive which, for that purpose, has been largely overlooked by Methodist and local historians. Although it is not a complete record of the evolution of Methodism in the town, and must be used in conjunction with the extant administrative records of Methodism in the area (many preserved by the Bolton Archives and Local Studies Service at Bolton Central Library), the MOA is useful for filling in gaps about the lived experience of Methodism, notably during the late 1930s as a second global war approached and the implications of Methodist union in 1932 began to play out. The current paper hopes to offer both a guide to its main components and how to access them, as well as impetus for other scholars to make use of its rich detail for further output.

³² SxMOA1/5/19/64/F/14.

³³ Lawton noted that, since the introduction of planned giving, the average contribution had risen from 3d in the collection plate to 5s. 'We are wealthier now than we have ever been.'

Bibliography

- Field, Clive D., 'Religion in Worktown: Anatomy of a Mass-Observation Sub-project', *Northern History*, 53, no. 1 (2016): 116–37.
- Hall, David, *Worktown: The Astonishing Story of the Birth of Mass-Observation*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2015.
- Harrison, Tom, *Britain Revisited*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1961.
- Hinton, James, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937–1949*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Tomkins, Daniel, *Mission Accomplished: The Story of the First 100 Years of the Bolton Methodist Mission*, Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1997.

APPENDIX

Document A

Methodist churches in the county borough of Bolton, 1937–38

Church	Circuit	Sittings
EX-WESLEYAN METHODIST		
Victoria Hall, Knowsley St	Bolton Mission	1,801
Kings Hall, Bradshawgate	Bolton Mission	1,370
Bridge St	Bridge St	896
Fletcher St	Bridge St	1,106
Seymour Rd, Astley Bridge	Bridge St	850
Chew Moor, Lostock	Bridge St	150
Wigan Rd, Deane	Bridge St	350
St Helens Rd, Daubhill	Bridge St	670
Platt St, Slaterfield, Great Bolton	Bridge St	250
Ulleswater St	Bridge St	500
Cable St mission, Little Bolton	Bridge St	300
St Helens Rd	Bridge St	300
Wesley, Castle St, Tonge	Bolton (Wesley)	668
Victoria, Grecian Crescent, Great Lever	Bolton (Wesley)	888
Radcliffe Rd, Darcy Lever	Bolton (Wesley)	530
Tonge Moor	Bolton (Wesley)	500
Bury Rd, Breightmet	Bolton (Wesley)	310
Trinity, Bury Rd, Tonge Fold	Bolton (Wesley)	420
Back Foundry St mission, Artillery St	Bolton (Wesley)	164
Alder St, Great Lever	Bolton (Wesley)	200
Park St	Park St	900
Halliwell Rd, Halliwell	Park St	1,152
Raphael St, Brownlow Fold, Halliwell	Park St	220
Delph Hill, Doffcocker, Halliwell	Park St	525
Chorley Old Rd, Smithills, Halliwell	Park St	496
Fall Birch, Chorley New Rd	Park St	151
Watergate Lane, Middle Hulton	Farnworth	180
EX-PRIMITIVE METHODIST		
Higher Bridge St, Little Bolton	Higher Bridge St	704
Harvey St, Halliwell	Higher Bridge St	350
Castle Hill, Tonge Moor Rd, Tonge	Higher Bridge St	300
Turner St, Folds	Higher Bridge St	200
Bethesda, Moor Lane	Moor Lane	600
Zion, St Helens Rd, Daubhill	Moor Lane	280
EX-UNITED METHODIST		
St Georges Rd [MNC]	Park St	560
Hanover, Gilnow Rd [UMFC]	Park St	314
Peace St, Derby St, Daubhill [UMFC]	Park St	216

Continued

(Continued)

Church	Circuit	Sittings
Melbourne Rd, Willows Lane, Deane [MNC]	Park St	260
Albert Place, Clarence St [UMFC]	Albert Place	?
INDEPENDENT METHODIST		
Folds Rd, Little Bolton	Bolton	450
Noble St, Daubhill	Bolton	350
Chalfont St, Astley Bridge	Bolton	400
High St, Great Lever	Bolton	350
Beverley Rd, Chorley New Rd	Bolton	350
Top o' the Brow, Breightmet	Bolton	200

Sources: The basic list of churches is an edited conflation of three separate and undated typescripts in SxMOA1/5/5/15/A, supplemented by other places of worship mentioned elsewhere in MOA or other contemporaneous sources. Churches lying outside the boundaries of the 1937 county borough of Bolton have been excluded. The number of sittings has been taken from *Methodist Church Buildings: Statistical Returns including Seating Accommodation as at July 1st 1940* (Manchester: Department for Chapel Affairs, [1947]), 47–8 and from *Independent Methodist Churches Year Book for 1939–40* (Wigan: Independent Methodist Churches Book Room, [1939]), S-4.

Notes: Albert Place church was sold early in 1938 to Bethel Evangelistic Church. MNC denotes Methodist New Connexion and UMFC denotes United Methodist Free Churches, both of which (along with the Bible Christians) merged into the United Methodist Church in 1907.

Document B

Daily programme of activities at the Victoria Hall, Bolton, 15–23 January 1938

Start	Finish	Activity	Present	Reference
<i>Saturday, 15 Jan</i>				
1845	2030	Handbill distribution	4	
1915	2145	Popular concert	930	
<i>Sunday, 16 Jan</i>				
0945	1025	Morning Sunday school	11	SxMOA1/5/5/17/B/22
1030	1140	Morning service	60	SxMOA1/5/5/20/C/9
1430		Sunday school classes	410	SxMOA1/5/5/22/E/9
1500	1600	Men's brotherhood	50	
1745		Prayer meeting	17	SxMOA1/5/5/20/C/12
1830	2000	Evening service	1,400	SxMOA1/5/5/20/C/11
2000	2045	Song service	100	SxMOA1/5/5/20/C/13
<i>Monday, 17 Jan</i>				
1400	1600	Public health clinic	90	
1900	2000	Band of Hope	54	SxMOA1/5/5/22/F/1
2000	2110	Bible study and prayer	11	SxMOA1/5/5/23/A/4
2000	2105	Sister Ethel's society class	12	
2000	2100	Fishing club	12	
<i>Tuesday, 18 Jan</i>				
1500	1600	Sister Florence's society class	19	SxMOA1/5/5/22/F/3
1830	1930	Mr Fray's junior society class (boys)	3	SxMOA1/5/5/22/F/2
1900	1950	Miss Bricknell's junior society class	5	
1930	2035	Miss Cuttle's society class	55	SxMOA1/5/5/23/A/8
1930	2045	St John's Ambulance	6	
1930	2015	Holiday savers club		SxMOA1/5/5/21/E/17

Continued

(Continued)

Start	Finish	Activity	Present	Reference
2000	2100	Misses Yearsley's society classes	90	
2000	2100	Miss Lomax's society class	65	
2000	2105	Mr Yearsley's society class	18	SxMOA1/5/5/23/A/9
2000		Orchestra practice for Sunday	8	SxMOA1/5/5/21/E/17
2000	2135	Carpet bowls	50	
2030	2130	Mr Woods's society class		SxMOA1/5/5/23/A/10, SxMOA1/5/5/23/A/11
<i>Wednesday, 19 Jan</i>				
1500	1600	Sister Ethel's society class	13	
1900	2000	Miss Brickwell's junior society class	6	
1930	2045	Mrs Standing's society class	28	
1930	2045	Boys' Brigade	40	
2000	2100	Miss Rothwell's society class	8	
2000	2100	Sister Ethel's society class	15	
<i>Thursday, 20 Jan</i>				
1420	1515	Savings bank		
1430	1615	Nursery	7	
1500	1600	Women's meeting	340	
1600		Choir practice	14	
1600		Workers meeting		
1830	1945	Brownies	7	SxMOA1/5/5/22/F/6
1930	2040	Girl guides	20	SxMOA1/5/5/22/F/4
1945	2050	Mrs Woods's society class	6	
2000	2105	Sister Florence's society class	12	
2000	2110	Miss Pilling's society class	12	SxMOA1/5/5/22/F/5
2000	2110	Rev Hannah's society class	65	SxMOA1/5/5/23/A/13
2000	2100	Choir practice for services	20	SxMOA1/5/5/21/E/20
<i>Friday, 21 Jan</i>				
1500		Methodist ministry meeting	20	
1900	2115	Carpet bowls	10	
1900	2100	Boys' Brigade	36	
1930	2100	League of Nations Union executive	20	
2000	2115	Wesley Guild	60	SxMOA1/5/5/17/B/23
<i>Saturday, 22 Jan</i>				
1900	2100	Handbill distribution	5	
1915	2200	Popular concert	1,000	SxMOA1/5/5/19/D/7
<i>Sunday, 23 Jan</i>				
0945	1030	Service	30	
1030	1155	Morning service	88	SxMOA1/5/5/20/C/14
1430		Sunday school classes		SxMOA1/5/5/22/E/10
1500	1600	Men's brotherhood	66	SxMOA1/5/5/24/A/10
1630	1730	Tea	18	SxMOA1/5/5/24/A/11
1745	1822	Prayer meeting	12	SxMOA1/5/5/20/C/23
1830	1955	Evening service	1,500	SxMOA1/5/5/20/C/15
2000	2045	Song service	100	SxMOA1/5/5/21/E/21

Source: Compiled from SxMOA1/5/5/24/A/9 and individual documents cited in final column.

Document C

'Methodism Alive', by Joseph L. Wilcock, August 1938

I have a problem, and it's not a very difficult one to answer now. It's much simpler by putting it this way. Do you know of anyone in this town, who does not, or has not, set foot inside this centre of the Methodist revival?

I think you will find it difficult to contradict me when I say that they are a rarity. Everyone whose religious roots are in the Protestant faith most certainly know it to be alive with a faith that stamps and seals the personal life.

I can never tire of telling people of what I have seen and heard there, particularly to the grouzers and those who have it always on their tongues, 'Oh, the Church, why it's dead, no one takes it seriously these days.' Well, let these take heed and warning, for here they can easily be put out of their mournful stride.

I wish this to be challenging, the need demands it, where the Church of God is a living and vital force. Then, from that centre, we have a lesson to learn. Let us take it.

For the last two years, we have had a group working here in Bolton, and part of its work has been to see, hear, and record the institutions of the place, the value and worth of religion in this workaday community. My job has primarily been that of studying religion.

My answer to the questioner is this, if religion is a reality, then the integration of its principles can be seen and known in the personal lives of its members, and it is of the brightest and most vital centre in this town that I am writing.

My wanderings in and out of 'The Hall' have convinced me that ordinary language cannot adequately describe my own reactions and the wealth of happy life to be found there.

To many of the members, 'it is a second home', as one member said of it. I suggest that the home is only a small chip of the larger rock, for it is here they find the way, here they make for, as does the motorist for his petrol supply, they come here for a fresh contact with those truths which make their personal lives the crystal clear forces they need to be, especially in these hurrying days.

They are the members of the larger family, and it is stirring to see them all gathering as they do week after week in those fellowship classes, for here is to be found the solid rock.

No church can show a more humble and democratic spiritual grounding. Here is the nucleus of the strength of the movement which swept the western world. Here in these classes, I found straight speaking, earnest enquiry, and sincere answer.

Any list of activities in this centre would be so much verbiage, unless an idea of the spirit in which it is carried on could be given. They have that rarity in these days, comradeship, that 'will-o-the-wisp' of all the political movements.

Have you seen that mountain of youth, there in the gallery every Sunday evening of the year?

So you know this: that all the political movements in the town could not produce so much youth in one lumping together! And here in this hall we can see them every Sunday, laughing and smiling, happy in their faith in these days of shaking foundations everywhere outside.

I have met and talked with them, heard them tell of the change in their lives since they came here. The week does not contain the number of nights they would come here.

It has been a satisfaction to me to invite some who have lost their faith, or perhaps never had any, to come and see this place and, during the Sunday evening service, just to gaze up at these 3–400 young people, then they come away shaking their heads, they can't understand it.

I shall always carry a thought of deep respect for those leaders of these young people, to hear how, for year in and year out, they see their spiritual charges rise to the full glory of membership, and with their families take their place on the floor of the hall.

I know now that the hand-shaking is not a habit with them, it is of real friends greeting each other. That was one illusion gone!

I can give one word of advice to those who want to see the Church at work, go to the Victoria Hall, and wander about there with your eyes and ears open. I know you cannot come away and still talk about the 'problem of modern youth'; it doesn't exist there.

My own earliest memories of the hall are of twenty years ago, as a boy. In those days we had visits from the military bands, and I vividly recollect sitting behind the band on the platform, no room anywhere else, looking across to the packed gallery, filled with awe at that crowd.

There came a later day, when the memory of the founder of your Christ-spirited movement was celebrated, not an inch to spare, packed to the doors, the only clear space a few square yards around the desk for the 'Pres'.

It was here I sat and stood, met the challenging smile of your minister, as though he were saying, 'Now what about it, do you think you can get all this in a book?' He was right, you can't.

For when singing and testimony like that come from those young folk, well, language is as the tortoise in its native slime, compared to the welcome breeze on a sunlit day.

My blushes were well spent on that afternoon which found me with those 400 women, sipping the cup of tea and nibbling their biscuits, then to listen to the speaker, noting the working mothers sneaking off before the end, hurrying away to prepare their menfolk's meal. And this 'Women's Fellowship' is a feature of every week!

It's a sight for the sorest eyes, nearly all of them working class, the hard working ones; their hands clearly show this.

Will you, my friends, do this, ask your friends who are always wailing of the failure of the Church, to go and look at this meeting?

Go inside the young people's Guild, an average of 100 of them, have one of their own members read a paper to them, full of fire, the accent only serves to give emphasis to the message and its meaning to those present.

Some of those youngsters possess every known translation of the New Testament. Nervous, no not a bit of it, they want a basis for life, and they have found it, that's the spirit that makes Methodism of the future possible.

I've heard the testimony of a girl of ten, full of smiles and vitality, and that of your grand old man nearing the century mark.

Do you know of those who go out into the main streets on the Saturday nights, passing the handbills and bravely whispered word that the passer-by will be welcome on the Sunday?

Have you been present on a Sunday night, just after the service, when the word is passed round, 'Who's for an open air meeting?' And in less than a minute there are twelve of them on their way to the school hill, each and every one giving voice to their faith.

Would you listen if I told you of the time when these four lads went out to visit the young lad who lived in that drink-sodden house, his one pair of trousers, well smeared with the oil of the mill, the background of a domestic hall, and these lads went out to make a friend of that lad? It was not easy, yet I swear they set a seed.

Can you match that sunlit room where the tiny tots are praying to the sounds of Schubert, and marching round to put pennies in a box for the work in other lands?

Have you been in that prayer meeting, held always before the evening service? You'll find the foundation stone there.

Of the staff, well it's difficult to speak, untiring efforts and dedicated lives, I spare their blushes, they would wish it.

Like Mr Hannah, they all empty themselves into their work. He loves it, he seeks more of it, and does it with a fire of love. Unafraid, he speaks his mind, 'An when he sez a thing, well, he sez it an means it.'

If you are asked to give, can you face this half-told story and stint your efforts? I hope not, for, if you do, then most surely you will have passed that period of trial and opportunity, which looms ahead of us. The clouds are gathering, the signs are not to be mistaken. There are those forces in the world today which hate religion as anathema to them. Misapplied science, crude materialism batter our youth for their allegiance.

They are nothing new, they thinly disguise a hellish stew. While you have the liberty, make sure you do your share, seeing to it that the Bread of Life is passed on to the people.

The Victoria Hall is a proven vehicle for such a work.

Source: SxMOA1/5/5/20/A/7. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

Note: To assist readability, limited editorial changes have been made to capitalisation and punctuation, and spelling errors have been corrected.