



A chapel with lessons for today

LAST week we noted the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre, a pivotal event in the slow progress of movements demanding basic rights for the ordinary men and – admittedly rather later – the women of Great Britain. The local commemoration of the event that had taken place on St Peter's Field was rather overshadowed by controversy about the memorial commissioned to identify that location. The memorial near the Manchester Convention and Conference Centre includes the names of towns from which protesters travelled, names of the dead and at its summit a compass points toward other locations where the state has killed citizens. Its design of 18 rising concentric circles reflects the number believed killed, but ensures that access is impossible for many people with physical disabilities. Modifications are promised.

The contrast with this week's front-page news about the Old Chapel at Tolpuddle is self-evident (see Page One). While the village has changed greatly since the time of the men who became known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, there has not been the wholesale eradication of the 19th century landscape which St Peter's Field suffered. Consequently, far from needing to create a new memorial in a 21st century city-scape, at Tolpuddle the Old Chapel stands as a 200 year-old witness to the bravery of the men from Dorset who had the courage to organise themselves in the face of the brutality of their working conditions. Moreover, it will serve to remind the many visitors to the Dorset village of the close links of Methodism with the nascent trade union movement, represented by the commitment of a majority of the martyrs.

Secured

Consequently, we join with the very many people in welcoming the news that the future of the Old Chapel and its development have been secured by significant grant funding together with voluntary donations. The reason is not simply nostalgia for that long-gone age when Methodism and Methodists were more influential in British society – and, indeed, far more radical than they had become even by the end of the 19th century. Nor do we welcome the news simply because a chapel, even one Grade II* Listed and on the "at risk" register, has been saved from terminal deterioration. Architectural preservation in isolation can be little more than an academic cultural exercise, quite disconnected from the reality of British society in 2019.

Rather, the restoration and development of the Old Chapel gives its trustees the opportunity to re-present the story of Tolpuddle in a way that is hugely relevant to 21st century Britain – and arguably more relevant than just a generation ago. Questions are being asked about workers' rights in a Britain no longer constrained by EU regulations. The exploitation of workers servicing the digital economy, or forced to accept pseudo-self-employment, or refused contracts with regular hours, all continue to cause concern. Across the country, even families with two people working full time can struggle to survive without state benefits. Yet the context is that in too many workplaces the trade unions have become so marginalised as to be unable adequately to protect the interests of their members.

Both Peterloo and Tolpuddle remind us of the long struggle for a fairer society in which each human being is accorded the rights and dignity which the Gospel demands. Yet just as our parliamentary democracy is not immune from neglectful erosion, so, too, the rights and dignity which, eventually, emerged from the struggle that started in Tolpuddle must be preserved for future generations. The Old Chapel will stand as a reminder of that necessity.