



## Lancashire Church History Sites



## England MTC Missionary Visit



# Early Church History in Lancashire, England



Heber C. Kimball

On 4<sup>th</sup> June 1837 the Prophet Joseph Smith approached Heber C. Kimball who was seated in the Kirtland Temple and whispered to him 'Brother Heber, the Spirit of the Lord has whispered to me: Let my servant Heber go to England and proclaim My Gospel and open the door of salvation to that nation'. Brother Kimball was stunned and overwhelmed at the call. The young Church was in crisis because of a worldwide financial panic and the resultant discord among the highest councils of the Church. Heber was not an educated man and felt inadequate to preach to those 'famed throughout Christendom for learning, knowledge and piety . . . to a people whose intelligence is proverbial!' He would also leave his young family virtually destitute. However, after several weeks of intense study and prayer in the temple, he was eager to begin this historic mission.

On 29<sup>th</sup> June Apostles Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde, Elder Willard Richards and Priests Joseph Fielding, Isaac Russell, John Goodson and John Snider boarded the 'Garrick' which set sail on 1<sup>st</sup> July and arrived at Liverpool on the River Mersey on the 19<sup>th</sup>. Brother Kimball was so excited that, when being rowed to shore on the 20<sup>th</sup>, he leapt the final 6 feet onto the dockside.



'Garrick'

After spending the night in Liverpool, he and his companions travelled by coach to Preston, where Reverend James Fielding, brother to Joseph, had a chapel and congregation. They preached in his Vauxhall Road Chapel on July 23, and also in the Market Square near the Obelisk, where a local election banner proclaimed, 'Truth Will Prevail.' This became the motto for their mission. Preston's current Market Square has changed since 1837, but those early missionaries would readily recognise the sandstone obelisk which still stands there. Following the baptismal service on 30<sup>th</sup> July the missionaries preached in the market square to a large crowd of people. They were opposed by a local minister, which simply caused the people to listen all the more to the message. Occasionally during the ensuing months, the elders would preach in the square, but more often would use their lodgings or a hired hall.



Preston Marketplace and Obelisk

## Avenham Park and River Ribble

Few of the clergy in Preston baptised by immersion in 1837, and of those who did, none would allow the missionaries to use their font. Accordingly, Elder Kimball planned to conduct the baptisms on the morning of Sunday, 30<sup>th</sup> July, in the River Ribble where it flowed through the south part of Preston. The novelty of this open-air baptism to be performed by American missionaries drew a crowd of seven to nine thousand from those enjoying the relaxation of Avenham Park. All nine of those baptised that Sunday morning were members of Reverend James Fielding's Vauxhall Chapel congregation: George D Watt, Charles Miller, Thomas and Ann Elizabeth Walmsley, George Wate, Miles Hodgson, Henry Bilsbury, Mary Ann Brown and Ann Dawson. Elder Kimball recorded that 'Two of the male candidates, when they had changed their clothes at a distance of several rods from the place where I was standing in the water, were so anxious to obey the Gospel that they ran with all their might to the water, each wishing to be baptised first. The younger, being quicker of foot than the elder, outran him, and came first to the water.' That first British member, George D Watt, became secretary to President Brigham Young and recorded much of the Journal of Discourses.

The traditional site where the baptisms are thought to have taken place is on the south side of the river, immediately upstream from the Old Tram Bridge. The original old wooden tram bridge was torn down in the 1960s, with the new concrete bridge constructed in exactly the same style.

There are two plaques sited in the Japanese Garden on the west end of Avenham, Park commemorating Preston's association with the growth of the Church in the British Isles. The larger monument was dedicated by President Gordon B. Hinckley in 1987, noting 150 years of the Church in the British Isles. The other, smaller plaque stands beside an oak tree, planted as a sapling in 1987 by the youth of the Leeds Stake, in gratitude to all missionaries to the British Isles, past, present, and future.



President and Sister Hinckley at Avenham Park Plaques

Preston is the cradle of the Church in the British Isles. The first branch of the Church was organised on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1837, and the first Mission Conference was held in the Temperance Hall ("The Cockpit") on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1837. Preston city served as headquarters for the Church from 1837 to 1840, and the first British saints to emigrate to America in 1840 came mainly from this area.

### Preston Lodgings



On arrival to Preston, Joseph Fielding left the group to find his brother, Reverend James Fielding, whilst John Goodson found lodgings for the other six in the upper two floors of a boarding

house located on the south-west corner of the junction of St Wilfrid Street and Fox Street. Elders Kimball and Hyde took a room on the top floor and the other four missionaries occupied the floor below them. On the morning of 30<sup>th</sup> July 1837; the day set for the first baptisms to take place. Early that morning Elder Russell was troubled by evil spirits, and asked Elder Kimball to cast them out. As Elder Kimball prepared to give Elder Russell a blessing in the top floor room, he was also attacked and fell unconscious to the floor. His description of the events that followed revealed much concerning the unseen world, and remains one of the most significant encounters between the priesthood of God and the evil spirits of the adversary:-

*"The first thing I recollectd was being supported by Elders Hyde and Richards, who were praying for me; Elder Richards having followed Russell up to my room. Elders Hyde and Richards then assisted me to get on the bed, but my agony was so great I could not endure it, and I arose, bowed my knees and prayed. I then arose and sat upon the bed, when a vision was opened to our minds, and we could distinctly see the evil spirits, who flamed and gnashed their*

*teeth at us. We gazed upon them about an hour and a half (by Willard's watch). We were not looking towards the window, but towards the wall. Space appeared before us and we saw the devils coming in legions, with their leaders, who came within a few feet of us.*

*They came rushing towards us like armies rushing to battle. They appeared to be men of full stature, possessing every form and feature of men in the flesh, who were angry and desperate; and I shall never forget the vindictive malignity depicted on their countenances as they looked on in the eye. Any attempt to paint the scene which then presented itself, or portray their malice and enmity, would be vain. We distinctly heard those spirits talk and express their wrath and hellish designs against us. However, the Lord delivered us from them, and blessed us exceedingly that day."*

Elder Kimball recovered from the attack that morning and proceeded to conduct the baptismal service as planned, but he worried that he had somehow brought the attack upon them through unworthiness on his part. It was not until he returned to the United States and reviewed the event with the Prophet Joseph Smith that he learned the real reason for the attack. In response to the question about his personal worthiness, the Prophet replied:-

*"No, Brother Heber, at that time you were nigh unto the Lord; there was only a veil between you and Him, but you could not see Him. When I heard of it, it gave me great joy, for I knew the work of God had taken root in that land. It was this that caused the devil to make a struggle to kill you. The nearer a person approaches to the Lord, a greater power will be manifested by the adversary to prevent the accomplishment of his purpose."*

### 15 Wadham Road, Preston

This is the site of President Gordon B. Hinckley's first missionary lodgings. Despite his age of 23 years and his university degree, because of his shyness Elder Hinckley thought of himself as 'backward'. Elder Hinckley's first mission assignment, within 48 hours of arriving in England (part of the European Mission under President John A. Widtsoe), was to journey alone to Preston, where he arrived on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1933. On his very first day in Preston he was called upon to preach and sing in the Market Place; he was terrified. In addition, because of allergies, he was sick and miserable, suffering with hay fever from the very moment he stepped off the train in Preston, 'into the lush hillsides and meadows of Lancashire.' Elder Hinckley found that people in Preston were desperately poor and seemed to have little interest in religion. He became despondent. Day followed day in that state and, 'After he had taken as much as he felt he could, Elder Hinckley wrote his father that he wasn't getting anywhere with missionary work, and that he couldn't see the point in wasting his time and his father's money.' (Gordon B. Hinckley, Man of Faith. Sheri L. Dew. p.64) That was when his father wrote the short letter that President Hinckley has often shared with others: 'Dear Gordon, I have your recent letter. I only have one suggestion: forget yourself and go to work.'



President Hinckley went to his room with letter in hand, got on his knees, and poured his heart out to the Lord. He promised to try to forget himself, and lose himself in the Lord's service. 'That July day in 1933 was my day of decision. A new light came into my life and a new joy into my heart. The fog of England seemed to lift, and I saw the sunlight. Everything good that has happened to me since then I can trace back to that decision I made that day in Preston.' (ibid.)



## The Ribble Valley, Chatburn and Downham

Downham is a beautiful village in the Ribble Valley at the foot of Pendle Hill. It is picturesque and peaceful, seemingly unchanged with time since the mid-nineteenth century. Other than the Post Office and the Assheton Arms, there are no businesses permitted, nor are there any 'new' buildings; modern utility lines are buried or hidden; and the atmosphere is one of peace in a rural setting. The local church, St. Leonard's, has existed for over 700 years, with the present tower dating from the 1400s.

After their initial success in Preston, the first seven missionaries separated to different fields of labour, and Heber C. Kimball and Joseph Fielding came up the Ribble Valley. The overall landscape, appearance, and feel of the valley remains much the same as it did in 1837.

The most spiritual experiences of Elder Heber C. Kimball's Ribble Valley ministry occurred in the two small villages of Chatburn and Downham, lying just south of the River Ribble on the northern side of Pendle Hill. While teaching at other locations in the Valley, he had determined to visit them. He got an interesting response from some of the other missionaries:

*Having mentioned my determination of going to Chatburn to several of my brethren, they endeavoured to dissuade me from going, informing me that there could be no prospect of success whatever, as several ministers of different denominations had endeavoured in vain to raise churches in these places. This did not discourage me in the least; I went in the name of Jesus Christ. My testimony was accompanied by the Spirit of the Lord and was received with joy, and these people who were represented as being so hard and obdurate were melted down into tenderness and love, and the effect seemed to be general. (HCK 1 Oct 1864)*

The people of Chatburn welcomed Elder Kimball by obtaining the use of the tithe-barn in the village and providing a large barrel in the centre where he could stand to preach. At the conclusion of his sermon he announced that he was ready to perform the ordinance of baptism for any who desired it. He later wrote:

*When I concluded, I felt someone pulling at my coat, exclaiming, 'Maister, Maister.' I turned round and asked what was wanted. Mrs. Elizabeth Partington said, 'Please sir, will you baptise me?' 'And me?' 'And me?' exclaimed more than a dozen voices. Accordingly I went down into the water and baptised twenty-five. I was engaged in the duty, and confirming them and conversing with the people until after midnight.*

Elder Kimball went the following day to Downham, where he baptised another twenty-five to thirty. The interest he generated in these two villages now began to be general. He had to preach in the open air, and parents began to instruct their children on the subjects he had taught about. His companion, Elder Joseph

Fielding, also testified of the remarkable spiritual outpouring that attended this visit

*There is a wonderful work in Downham and Chatburn. It appears as though the whole of the inhabitants were turning to the Lord from 10 to 90 years old. It is truly affecting to see them. One day I baptised seventeen. They are full of love for us and each other.*

On a subsequent visit to the villages, Elder Kimball reported:

*Having been observed drawing nigh to the town, the news ran from house to house, and immediately on our arrival, the noise of their looms was hushed, the people flocked to the doors to welcome us, and see us pass. The youth of the place ran to meet us, and took hold of their mantles and then of each others hands; several having hold of hands went before us singing the songs of Zion, while their parent gazed upon the scene with delight, and poured out their blessings upon our heads, and praised the God in heaven for sending us to unfold the principles of truth, the plan of salvation to them.*

The marvellous response of Ribble Valley folk to the message of the Restoration is manifest in the make-up of the units attending conference on Christmas Day 1837. Of the 23 mentioned by name in 'A Century of Mormonism in Great Britain', seven were in the Ribble Valley.

A number of families who joined the church in Chatburn and Downham emigrated to the United States. Among them were the Spencers, Thornbers, Yates, and Parkinsons. No members of the church are currently known to live in Downham.

Before concluding his mission and returning to America, Elder Kimball made a last visit to the villages of Chatburn and Downham. He wrote:

*'On the morning I left, many were in tears, thinking they should see my face no more. When I left them, my feelings were such as I cannot describe. As I walked down the street I was followed by numbers; the doors were crowded by the inmates of the houses to bid me farewell, who could only give vent to their grief in sobs and broken accents. While contemplating this scene I was constrained to take off my hat, for I felt as if the place was holy ground. The Spirit of the Lord rested down upon me and I was constrained to bless that whole region of country. I was followed by a great number to Clitheroe, a considerable distance from the villages, who could then hardly separate from me. My heart was like unto theirs, and I thought my head was a fountain of tears, for I wept for several miles after I bid them adieu. I had to leave the road three times to go alone to streams of water to bathe my eyes.'*

When, after returning to America, Elder Kimball related this incident to the Prophet Joseph, the Prophet told him

that the reason he felt as he did in the streets of [Downham] was because the place was indeed 'holy ground'; that some of the ancient prophets had travelled in that region and dedicated the land, and that he, Heber, had reaped the benefit of their blessing.

**That blessing, as well as the one Elder Kimball left, now rests upon YOU as servants of the Lord in this significant and special land.**

*(From Truth Will Prevail, Moss et al, and The Life of Heber C. Kimball, Whitney)*



Main Street through Downham Village

### **Chatburn Baptismal Site**

In a 2006 issue of *Mormon Historical Studies*, Carol Wilkinson announced that "The location of a baptismal site in the village of Chatburn, England, used by Mormon missionaries in the 1830s and 1840s has been identified." Many were converted to the restored gospel in Chatburn as well as nearby Downham, Clitheroe and other villages. These converts numbered in the hundreds. Just where they were all baptized is not recorded, but many were likely baptized at this beautiful site in Chatburn. Identified by Wilkinson, it is central to a number of these villages (*See Mormon Historical Studies, 7.1-2 (spring/fall 2006), 83.*)



Chatburn Baptismal Site