

A group of members of Sandbach History Society recently visited Englesea Brook Chapel and Museum near Barthomley. Members were welcomed by Ruth Hilton, Project Director, and Amy Wilkinson, Heritage Officer, who explained that the museum tells the story of how Primitive Methodism – which had its roots in the area – transformed the lives of working people in the 19th century and spread both nationally and internationally.

Elizabeth Morris, Legacy Officer, spoke about the chapel and the movement. She said that the “Primitive” (meaning simple/original) movement evolved from the Wesleyan movement. Its founder was Hugh Bourne who was born at Bemersley in North Staffordshire. He was apprenticed as a wheelwright and whilst he had a limited formal education, he taught himself Hebrew and Greek and became a Methodist lay preacher. To engage with people, he developed open air preaching with group prayer and hymn singing.

In 1807 he organised an open air “camp meeting” at Mow Coop. The meeting was attended by William Clowes and in 1812 the two men organised a new organisation, the Society of Primitive Methodists. Primitive Methodism was shaped by Bourne’s concern for the welfare of working-class people. He saw education as a way of improving their social conditions and promoted education at the Sunday schools. The movement also accepted women as of equal status with men and encouraged them, as well as members from ethnic minorities, to preach.

The chapel at Englesea Brook was built in 1828 and Mrs Morris explained that it was deliberately built to look like a Georgian house: it was “the house of God” but also, if the venture had failed, it could be used as a domestic residence.

By 1852, the year in which Hugh Bourne died, the movement had 20,000 followers. His funeral was attended by 16,000 people and he is buried in the churchyard opposite the chapel.

The primitive Methodists eventually merged with the other Methodists to form the Methodist Church of Great Britain in 1932.

History Society members enjoyed coffee and cake in the garden before looking at exhibits in the adjoining Museum of Primitive Methodism. There is a large display of commemorative pottery, posters, banners, and a printing press set up by Hugh Bourne to produce publications for Primitive Methodism. Members were also taken to a purpose-built, temperature- and humidity-controlled store which houses over 5,000 objects including the largest collection of banners in the UK.

A spokesperson for the Society said, “It was an excellent visit. The museum staff gave a thoroughly professional and engaging presentation, and were extremely friendly and helpful. Members were fascinated to see the original chapel and the extensive collection of objects.”