
Mormon Baptismal Site in Chatburn, England

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The location of a baptismal site in the village of Chatburn, England, used by Mormon missionaries in the 1830s and 1840s has been identified. This village, along with the neighboring community of Downham, was the location of a large number of Mormon conversions when the message of the restored gospel was first preached to the inhabitants during this time period.

The first Mormon missionaries to England arrived in Liverpool in July 1837. These seven men (Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, Willard Richards, Joseph Fielding, Isaac Russell, John Goodson, and John Snyder), quickly moved to Preston where they were successful in receiving converts and organized a branch of the Church in that city. After organizing the Preston Branch they decided to separate and carry their message to other parts of the surrounding country. Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, and Joseph Fielding stayed in the Preston area and continued to proselytize and organize branches. Kimball and Fielding also began to venture into the upper reaches of the river Ribble Valley, teaching in Walkerford and Ribchester, where they experienced further success and organized additional branches of the Church.¹

Further upstream from these villages lay the small communities of Chatburn and Downham, just south of the river Ribble and north of towering Pendle Hill. Some of the most spiritual experiences of the missionary effort in the upper Ribble Valley occurred in these two villages. When Heber expressed a desire to visit the villages he noted receiving a negative response from some of his companions: “Having mentioned my determination of going to Chatburn to several of my brethren, they endeavored to dissuade me from going,

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informing me that there could be no prospect of success whatever, as several ministers of different denominations had endeavored in vain to raise churches in these places, this did not discourage me in the least I went in the name of Jesus Christ.”²

The Chatburn villagers showed up in large numbers to hear Elder Kimball preach, which he did standing on a barrel in a large village tithe-barn, speaking on the basic principles of the gospel. At the conclusion of his sermon he offered to perform the ordinance of baptism for anyone who desired it. Heber describes the scene that followed his invitation:

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 baptize me?” “And me?” “And me?” exclaimed more than a dozen voices. Accordingly I went down into the water and baptized twenty-five. I was engaged in the duty, and confirming them and conversing with the people until after midnight.

The next morning I returned to Downham, and baptized between twenty-five and thirty in the course of the day.

The next evening I returned to Chatburn. The congregation was so numerous that I had to preach in the open air, and took my stand on a stone wall, and afterwards baptized several.³

Branches were organized in Chatburn and Downham. The presence of the missionaries and the message they brought had a stirring effect on the villagers. Elder Kimball recalled how on one occasion as they passed through the village, work on the handlooms ceased in the cottages, and the villagers flocked to their doors to greet the elders, who were surrounded by the youth of Chatburn singing the songs of Zion.⁴

A bond of friendship developed between the missionaries and their converts in these two communities and at the conclusion of this first mission to England, before departing for the United States in April 1838, Elders Kimball and Fielding experienced an emotional farewell with their new English friends. Elder Kimball describes the occasion:

On the morning when I left Chatburn 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 hardly then 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 to streams of water to bathe my eyes.⁵



Chatburn stream behind the Methodist chapel showing the man-made waterfall (foreground) and the natural waterfall (background) and the pool inbetween, 2004. Photograph by Carol Wilkinson.



Chatburn stream behind the Methodist chapel showing the natural waterfall and pool where the Mormon baptisms were performed, 2005. Photograph by Alan Wilkinson.

In recounting this particular experience in Heber's life, Orson F. Whitney describes how Joseph Smith was able to explain the holy feeling that Heber perceived: "The Prophet Joseph told him [Heber] in after years that the reason he felt as he did in the streets of Chatburn was because the place was indeed 'holy ground,' that some of the ancient prophets had traveled in that region and dedicated the land, and that he, Heber, had reaped the benefit of their blessing."⁶

The remarkable spiritual events that took place in Chatburn included a large number of baptisms. However, it has been unclear exactly where these baptisms took place. There is a small stream, or burn, that flows through the village, finally joining the river Ribble just north of Chatburn.

In 1933, Methodists in Chatburn held a jubilee to celebrate fifty years since their church had been erected in 1883. They published a jubilee souvenir that year (1933) explaining the history of Methodism in Chatburn. In describing the history of the Chatburn Methodist church in the 1830s and '40s, the author, John Chatburn, refers to the activities of the early Latter-day Saint missionaries: "For quite a number of years the village was visited by Mormon missionaries. They obtained a considerable following, and used to baptize their converts in the brook which runs behind the present Chapel, at the foot of the little waterfall. As late as 1884 or '85, they succeeded in persuading a family of four persons to go to Salt Lake City. The Rev. J. B. Gratton liter-



Present-day Chatburn Methodist Church, 2005. Photograph by Alan Wilkinson.

ally laboured until the going down of the sun to dissuade them but without avail.”⁷

The “present Chapel” referred to, and being celebrated in the jubilee, was the one built in 1883. That chapel was torn down and replaced by a modern chapel on the same site in 2002.⁸ On the north side of the current chapel, a small public footpath leads to the brook mentioned in the jubilee souvenir. There are still today a natural waterfall and a man-made waterfall. The water below the man-made waterfall is not deep enough to immerse a person, and thus it is more likely that the pool beneath the natural waterfall is where many early Latter-day Saints were baptized.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the 1837-38 mission, see James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J. Whittaker, “The First Mission to England, 1837 Through 1838,” in *Men With a Mission: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles, 1837-1841* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 20-53.

2. Heber C. Kimball statement in “History of Brigham Young,” *Millennial Star* 26, no. 40 (October 1, 1864): 632; see also Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 169-70. Kimball was accompanied by Joseph Fielding. See Allen, et al., *Men With a Mission*, 50.

3. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 171.

4. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 172.

5. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 187-88. Allen, Esplin, and Walker date Kimball’s preaching in Chatburn and Downham as having taken place in March 1838, the month before the Mormon missionaries’ departure to return to America. See Allen, et al., *Men With a Mission*, 49.

6. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 188.

7. John H. Chatburn, *Chatburn Methodist Church Jubilee Souvenir 1883-1933* (Colne: Joshua Duckworth Ltd., 1933), 2.

8. See Chatburn Village: Chatburn Methodist Chapel, <http://www.chatburnvillage.org.uk/Churches/Methodist/Chapel.htm>, accessed 1 July, 2005.