

Methodist Central Halls – a mission with ambition

Nearly everyone in the UK will have seen a Methodist Central Hall. Almost every large town or city had one, and many still do. Pavarotti performed at Kingsway and the UN Declaration was signed in Westminster. But few of us know what they are, how they are used or how they came to be.

Built between 1886 and up until the Second World War, the Central Halls were an audacious experiment by Methodists to replace churches with something more modern in an attempt to reach the religiously indifferent and economically disadvantaged. They were to be centres of civic life: not just for worship but for entertainment, leisure and education capable of seating up to 2,500 worshippers. Their design was deliberately different from conventional church architecture to appeal to non-churchgoers. They merged into the secular fabric of the street and behind lay theatre-like main halls encircled by functional meeting spaces. Their far-sighted protagonists provided for their continuing upkeep by including spaces for hire while some even contained shops in the street façade.



Victoria Hall Bolton

In a collaboration with the Methodist Church Property Office, Angela Connelly of the [Manchester Architecture Research Centre \(MARC\)](#) was funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#) to undertake a PhD that told their story. The collaboration offered access to the extensive archives at the Methodist Property Office to begin the detective work. She has unearthed halls which had been forgotten and managed to compile an almost comprehensive list of all the Halls – despite the fact that less than a third of the sites remain in Methodist use. The study has shown that unlike cathedrals, Central Halls have proved to be remarkably adaptable buildings, but that heightens Angela's sense of the urgency and the importance of capturing their story before it is forgotten.

Combining interests in architecture, planning, cities, and religion, Angela has found that the buildings give remarkable insights into religious change and are important elements of our built landscape. Central Halls tell a story of the flowering of a certain style of mission by which Methodism sought to renew its roots among the poor, with innovative programmes of social care, education, entertainment and popular worship.

The decline of the halls also reveals much: congregations moved to the suburbs and what once seemed modern came to seem out of touch with the times. Such large buildings were expensive to maintain and, despite extensive modernisation, many closed their doors. Yet others have transformed their mission to modern needs despite smaller congregations. The Victoria Hall in Bolton runs a number of innovative outreach programs in their Victorian premises. Those not in Methodist hands have been transformed. Eastbrook Hall in Bradford is a landmark in the town and painstakingly restored as a mixed-use venue of student flats, shops and offices partly funded by the Prince's Regeneration Trust.

Find out more

- Listen to the podcast recorded with Angela Connelly discussing this research:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/methodist_central_halls_as_public_sacred_spaces
- Visit the project's website: <http://methodistcentrahalls.webeden.co.uk/#>
- Read Angela Connelly's entry 'Central Halls' for the Online Dictionary of Methodism from here:
<http://www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk/Dictfr1.html>
- Visit the Methodist Church of Great Britain's Technical and Conservation Department:
<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=churchlife.content&cmid=186>
- Visit the Methodist City Centre Network to see the work they do:
<http://www.methodistcitycentrenetwork.org.uk/>
- Contact: Angela Connelly angela.connelly-2@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk, Michael Hebbert m.hebbert@manchester.ac.uk and Andrew Crompton andrew.Crompton@liverpool.ac.uk.

You might also be interested in...

- Religion and Society project *Multi-faith Spaces* about the design shared buildings for different religions in the UK in which this project's co-investigator Andrew Crompton is also involved in with Ralf Brand and Chris Hewson of the Manchester Architecture Research Centre:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_three/large_research_projects
- Programme funded research about Protestant dissent in 17th to 19th century Britain:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_12/1291644822_Rivers_Phase_1_Collaborative_Studentship_Block.pdf
- The *Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion* conference which the Religion and Society Programme co-organised in 2010 and Angela Connelly and Michael Hebbert presented this project at. They are contributing a chapter to the book to come out of it:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/innovative_methods_in_the_study_of_religion
- The finding from another Religion and Society funded project *British Religion in Numbers* that Methodists live longer: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/news/show/brin_shows_that_methodists_live_longer

Project Details

Award Title

Methodist Central Halls as Public Sacred Space



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Team

Principal Investigator: Prof Michael Hebbert (Manchester)

Co-Investigator: Dr Andrew Crompton (Liverpool)

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Award Type

Phase 1 Collaborative PhD Studentship

Key terms

Methodism, architecture, mission, urban, secular, public sacred space, twentieth century