



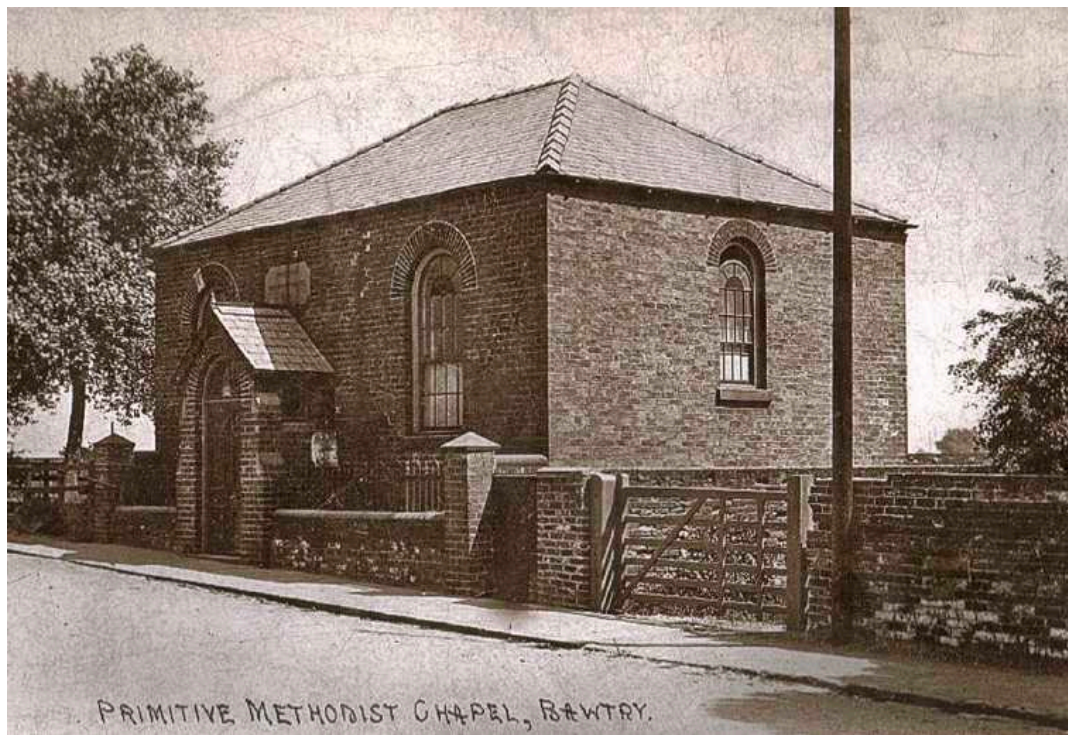
**Bawtry Heritage Group**  
Preserving our Past for the Future  
Registered Charity No. 1188945

## **Ninety Years of Drama in Bawtry**

The history of Methodism in Bawtry and its connection with the Phoenix Theatre and the Bawtry Amateur Dramatic Society.



Compiled by Antony Jones - January 2023



### **The Primitive Methodist Church on Station Road in Bawtry**

There were three Methodist chapels and one Methodist Church in Bawtry in the 19th Century.

These were the Primitive Methodist Chapel shown above, now part of the Phoenix Theatre.

The Wesleyan Chapel on Church walk, now a Gym.

The Independent Chapel on Church Street, demolished but probably somewhere near Bawtry Tyres on Church Street.

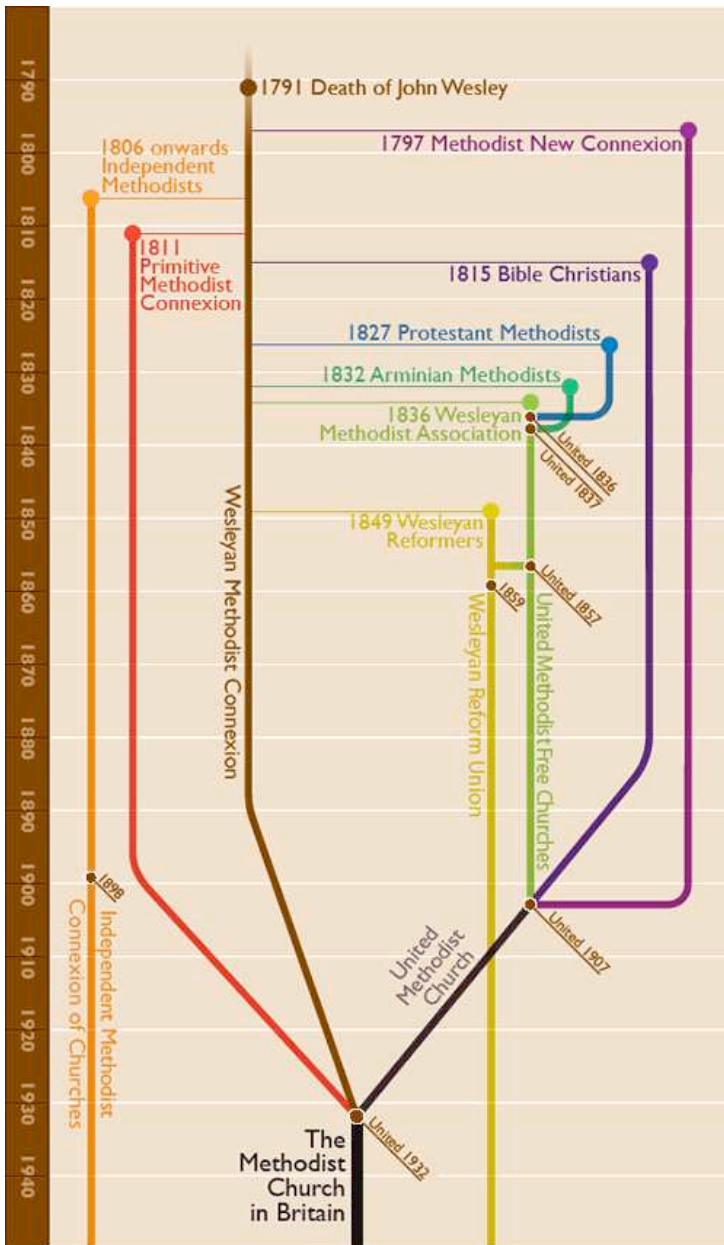
The Bawtry Methodist Church on Station Road. Still in regular use.



### **Why there is only the Methodist Church left in Bawtry now?**

After John Wesley died in 1791 the Methodists split up into a number of groups. Three of them were represented in Bawtry and had chapels. They were the Wesleyan , the Primitive and the Independent Methodists.

The biggest group to establish separately, were the Primitive Methodists, from 1807. Known also as the 'Ranters' or 'Prims', they wanted to get back to Methodism's original aims of outdoor evangelism and strict discipleship. They tended to be strongest in the working-class communities of the Midlands and North of England. Their services involved a fanatical zeal that Wesleyan leaders would have found embarrassing. The hymns they sang were strongly marked by popular culture and not seen as respectable. It was the Prims who built and occupied the chapel in 1862. which is now the Phoenix Theatre



**Methodist Union** was the joining together of several of the larger British Methodist denominations. These were the Wesleyan Methodists, the Primitive Methodists, and the United Methodists.

In 1932 a Uniting Conference met on 20th September in the Royal Albert Hall, London. It adopted the Deed of Union as setting forth the basis of Methodist union and declaring and defining the constitution and doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church, and a new Model Deed was executed.

After 1932, the new united body was known simply as The Methodist Church. To distinguish this from Methodism in other countries, chiefly the United States, it is now styled the Methodist Church of Great Britain.

With Union all the smaller chapels became redundant and all that was left was the Bawtry Methodist Church. The Primitive Chapel on Station Road became redundant and was used mostly for storage. The Wesleyan Chapel on Church Lane is now a Gym. The Independent Chapel on Church Lane was demolished.

All that is left for worship is the Methodist Church on Station Road which is still active.

# THE PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHAPEL (LATER THE PHOENIX THEATRE)

BUILT IN 1862

## ACQUISITION OF LAND ON STATION ROAD

'After repeated attempts to procure land in this place, R. M. Milnes, Esq., M.P., consented to sell. The purchase being effected, on Friday, August 8th, 1862, by request the members and friends met from several parts of the area, at the preaching room in Bawtry, at two o'clock in the afternoon, formed a procession, and sang through the principal streets to the site of the contemplated building; and although the weather was unfavourable the company was large, and attracted the attention of the inhabitants, many of whom attended to witness the ceremony.' (80 Years of Drama in Bawtry - Edward Burroughs.)

## CELEBRATION AT THE INDEPENDENT CHAPEL (NOW DEMOLISHED)

'The weather still being unpropitious, the company repaired to the Independent Chapel which was kindly placed at our service for the occasion, when an interesting sermon was delivered by the Rev. W. Harland, and was listened to with profit; after which a tea being gratuitously provided in a marquee, about two hundred and forty persons, besides the waiters and tray holders, partook of the bountiful repast.

The pecuniary proceeds for the day, including the chairman's gift of £10, and a promise of £2 by Mr. G. Bee, of Retford, amounted to the handsome sum of £28 16s., and who ever lives to witness the opening services, and the winding up of the accounts, will find that there has been on the part of the friends and the public in general, a disposition to place the chapel in an easy position.' (80 years of Arms in Bawtry - Edward Burroughs)



A POSSIBLE SITE OF THE INDEPENDENT CHAPEL. NOTE THE OLD BRICK WALL.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE BAWTRY AMATEUR DRAMATIC SOCIETY

A meeting was held in the Coach House of Bawtry Hall on 12th October, 1932. Miss E.M. Peake presided.



MRS E.M. PEAKE

It was suggested that people might want put on a play or two.

'The minutes solemnly recorded that it was duly proposed, seconded and passed that a society be formed to read and act plays and to meet regularly and this society to be called 'The Bawtry Amateur Dramatic Society' This was the beginning of 90 years of Drama.

It was also resolved that we set up these rules -

1. The subscription to be 2/6 per annum paid before 31st October.
2. That every member be proposed and seconded by a member and accepted by the Committee.
3. The Committee have it within their power to suspend any acting member from their part, in the event of the default of that member from rehearsals without due cause.
4. The Producer was to have full power to choose which member will take part in the plays produced.'

Rehearsals took place in the Coach House at Bawtry Hall and performances were held in the Ballroom. Mrs Peake, the daughter of Major George Peake who owned the Hall from 1906 to 1939, led the whole enterprise and it is she who we thank for the fact that the Society still exists 90 years later. She never married and devoted herself to the Society until the family left at the start of 1939.' (80 years of Drama in Bawtry - Edward Burroughs)

## A time line for Bawtry Hall

1787 - Built by Pemberton Milnes - Wool Merchant.

1906 - Sold to Major George Peake - Mining.

1939 - Requisitioned by MOD. Bomber and Strike Commands.

1988 - listed Grade 11\*.

Mid 80's - Sold by Defence Estates to Roger Byron-Collins.

3 years later sold to a Christian organisation for teaching and conference centre which lasted for 24 years.

2013 - Sold for 1.6 million to Bawtry Hall properties.

2017 - Sold to Jason Cooper. Now a wedding venue.

## EARLY BEGINNINGS OF THE BAWTRY AMATEUR DRAMATIC SOCIETY



### THE FIRST PLAY

'THE INVISIBLE DUKE'

154 TICKETS SOLD

PROFIT - £1/2s/10p

Note - Average profit today - £3000



### FIRST FULL LENGTH PLAY

The first full length play was performed in 1934.

It was 'Escape' by John Galsworthy

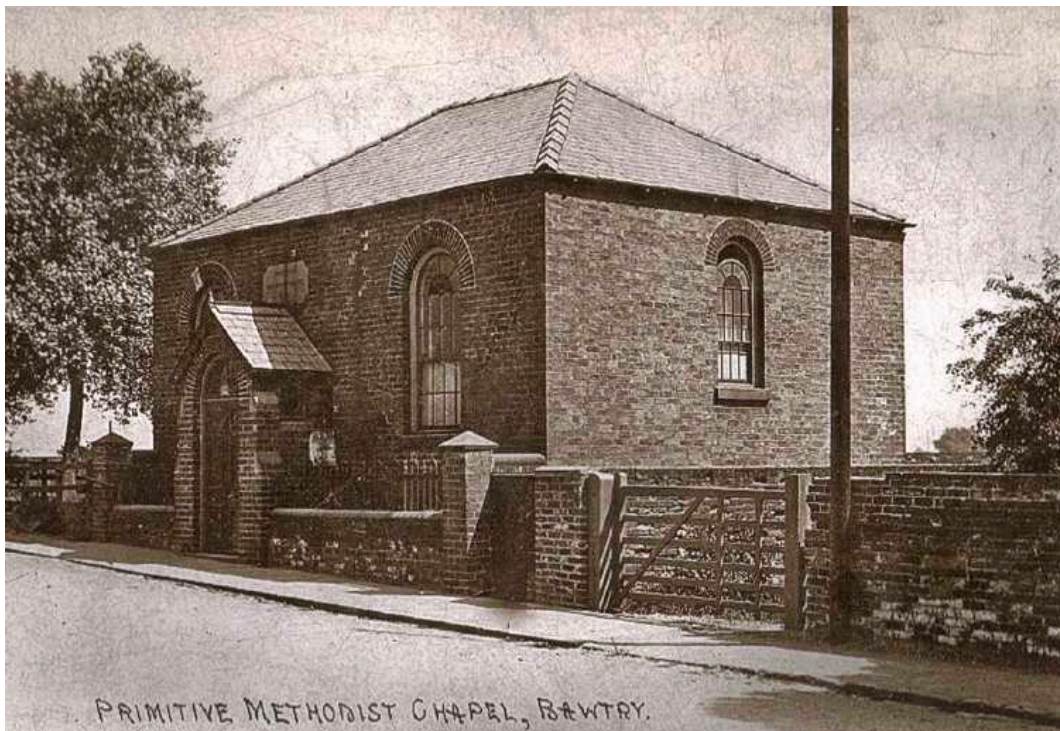
## 1939 - THE OUTBREAK OF WW2.

Most of the male actors were away fighting. They all returned safely. The Society lost their performance space as the RAF would not make the ballroom available. They lost their storage at Bawtry Hall. They also lost their permanent Producer, Miss Peake, who moved to London and, most importantly, they lost their social impetus.

For the next 40 years after the war rehearsals took place in member's homes and performances in the Church Hall on Church Lane.

The society was in desperate need of a new home.

And here it is.



The Old Primitive methodist Chapel.

The chapel had a front wall and a porch, traces of which can still be seen today. These were lost when Station Road was widened in 1960. There was land at the back which seemed to have been the site for earth closets. This land was important for the future.

The chapel was no longer needed for worship - the Methodist trustees sold it to Louise Marrison for £80. The Marrison family were builders. They built houses in Bawtry from between the wars to the 1950's. Look for their name on manhole covers in the town. They used it for storage of equipment and materials. The chapel occupied open land on a corner plot. Queens Crescent did not exist at that time.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEATRE

By 1948 Albert Marrison had retired and had no more use for the building. The chapel was rented to the society for 8/6p a week. It has been the society's home ever since.

At that time it was a rehearsal space and Social Room with storage but with no stage. The Chapel was not yet a theatre and the name 'Phoenix' had not been coined. It consisted of the auditorium. The entrance is where the false door is now. It was used for storage and rehearsal but was unheated and cold. There was no heating for 24 years! It had no running water until 1978. It was not used for performances which were still performed in the Church Hall on Church Lane.

The society had an acting membership of possibly six women and 3 men. That season there was one play for 3 nights'  
For the next few years there was a downward trend. The 1955 minutes report

Last production profit - £19/19s/1d  
Cash at the start of the season - £18/11s/6d  
Receipts for the season - £26/8s/3d  
Expenditure £34/15/8d  
Cash in hand - £10/4s/1d

Coffee mornings and a membership drive improved the situation. By November there was balance in hand of £30. In May, 1957 the chairman reported that they had enough money in hand until November but not for the next year. They planned to do one last play in July. If that could not be cast an EGM would be called to discuss winding up the society again. The Society was struggling to survive! It did battle on until, in 1965, there was a serious fire which destroyed the roof

The society had lost its home, all its scenery and props and all the furniture. Was this the end? It was not!

Crisis brings out the best in people.

The previously planned play was put on in the Church Hall through a enormous effort put in by everyone including other Drama groups who lent equipment.

No plays were put on in the two years it took to repair the chapel which was fortunately, insured.

The theatre rose again from the flames - now you know where the name comes from.



After the fire the three people below made significant contributions to the development of the chapel into the Phoenix Theatre.



Colin Crossland  
1924-1995

Colin Crossland was a huge asset to the Society. The way the building looks now with its extensions and extra facilities would probably not have happened without his ideas and influence.



Liz Cruddas  
1948-2016

Liz joined the Society in the early sixties and took on just about every role. Without her fund raising skills - she raised a total of £90,000 - the theatre would not look like it does today.



Edward Burroughs -  
1943-2022

With grateful thanks to Edward who served the Society in all capacities for many years and who kept the Society's archive without which much of the information in this paper would have been lost.

In 1962 The Society received a letter from the owner of the chapel that she wished to sell. She was willing to sell it to the Society for between £600 and £1000. A sum well beyond their reach. The Society was allowed to stay on as tenant as long as they made an effort to raise the money. The theatre struggled to raise money and there was talk of winding up the Society.

In August 1972 Mr Harrison expressed an interest in buying the building. He owned the filling station on South Parade and the institute on South Parade. He intended to use it for storage. In September the Society received notice to quit. They insisted on their legal right of six month notice. Mrs Jackson was sympathetic and willing to accept £600. She allowed the use of the theatre to give time for the Society to raise the money

A special meeting was called and the situation explained. Members were invited to make small interest free loans - say £10. £470 pounds was raised in minutes. The remainder came from reserves and the Society purchased the building for £600. It was a good investment at £600. The building is now insured for over a million.

Now the building belonged to the Society they could begin to make improvements. Electric heaters were installed. In 1978 running water was installed but only to a sink and not to a toilet. An upper floor was installed at the northern end with a seven foot height for storage. That was removed later. The lower floor was used for rehearsal and social events. There was still no stage and performances continued to take place in the Church Hall.

In 1979 during a coffee break Colin Crossland produced a rough drawing for a stage. There was just room at the back of the theatre (where the old earth closets were). There was room for a stage, a dressing room and two small toilets.

This was a most important moment for the Society and the theatre.

Planning permission and building approval were obtained.

For the two years it took to build the stage, the chapel could not be used.

The biggest job was raising the enormous RSJ to create the proscenium arch. This was done Egyptian style by building 2 ramps of bricks and manhandling it into position. Much of the labour was provided free by a scheme called Community Industry. Materials were obtained at cost or even donated.

### **Other additions**

Tiered seating, central heating, seats and carpet from old cinemas, curtains from the Town Council were all installed. The cost was £10,000, even with free labour. Again this was raised with small loans. There was still no lounge and the toilets were hardly adequate. But the chapel was now a proper theatre.



New theatre opened on 23rd April 1983, Shakespeare's birthday.

## The next development

The building was now a theatre but it had no lounge. There were two small toilets and a tiny kitchen. Changing space was minimal. There was no workshop or bar.

They needed land. The land at the back of the theatre was a large garden but they were unable to buy that. There was land on the corner of Queens Crescent and after much delay and prevarication and after an intervention by the MP, Doncaster Council sold the Society the land for £5000.

Once again Collin Crossland produced plans and supervised the project to build and equip a lounge. Finance was obtained again from small loans, reserves and a substantial Arts Council Grant. The work took 18 months and again the labour was provided by Community Industry.

The new lounge opened for the 1994-5 season. It comprised a sitting area, a workshop and a bar and kitchen and a new entrance was created where the stage door is now located but still no improved toilets.

Sadly Colin Crossland died before it was finished but he will be remembered as the creator of both the stage and the new lounge. He was an actor and director as well.

In 2004 a routine Local Authority inspection of the theatre took place. The Society was told that it had inadequate toilets - true - and there was no disabled toilet. We would lose our performance licence if this was not remedied. They needed an extension to the new lounge. More land was purchased to the left of the new lounge and an extension was planned. This time they needed an architect and a builder.

The cost was £104,269. Grants were obtained from The Arts Council, Doncaster Community Forum and Bawtry Town Council. The rest was raised from gifts and reserves. The second extension added a new bar, toilets for Ladies and Gents and Disabled people, a new main entrance, a plant room and a cloakroom.



The New Lounge as it is now after two extensions

## The Roof Crisis

In 2010 the roof was condemned. The flat roof over the stage leaked all the time. The roof timbers were rotting and full of worm. Some of the chapel timbers were still the post-fire charred original timbers. The theatre needed a new roof or they would have to close.

Local builders Gary and Sally Cowan, friends of the theatre, quoted £75,000 for the new roof. It was to be completely remodelled to get rid of the flat roof. Attic trusses were installed to provide a huge storage attic.



Off comes the old roof



On goes the new one



The Bawtry Amateur Dramatic Society has continued to develop the Phoenix Theatre into a sophisticated, modern performance space.

Since 2012 the improvements shown below have taken place.

A complete upgrade of the lighting, including moving head lights and colour changing floods.

A move to LED to save energy..

Installation of cinema quality video projector, drop down screen and 5.1 sound equipment.

New digital sound and lighting control desks which can be controlled from a tablet in the auditorium.

A stage manager's control point in the right wing.

New curtain motor and rails.  
New furniture for the lounge.  
New auditorium seating.  
Air conditioning.  
A completely new boiler and heating system.  
And a lot more.

The Bawtry Amateur Dramatic Society has come a long way since it was started in Bawtry Hall by Miss Peake in 1932.