

Topics of

Whitefield's Tump

The bi-centenary of George Whitefield's evangelical revival in the Stroud district is to be celebrated to-morrow (Saturday) with an open-air gathering at Whitefield's Tump on Minchinhampton Common. This interesting event has been referred to in "The Office Window" for the past two weeks, but there are one or two features about the celebration, so appropriately arranged by the Pastor and congregation of Rodborough Tabernacle, that might warrant repetition in this column. It was from Whitefield's Tump, situated, as we are reminded by the attractive notice exhibited in various shop-windows, 100 yards west of the old Reservoir on Minchinhampton Common, that on Sunday, July 1st, 1739, the evangelist addressed a congregation of no fewer than 20,000, and it is said that several local Free Churches owe their origin directly to that meeting. We understand that extracts from Whitefield's sermon are to be read at the historic "Tump" to-morrow.

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A Remarkable Feat

In Whitefield's day there were no amplifiers to convey his voice to the confines of the crowds that assembled to hear him preach in the open air. If the figure of 20,000 quoted by historians is not exaggerated it must have been a remarkable feat of sound production on the part of the preacher to address—and be heard by—the whole of his vast congregation. Paul Hawkins Fisher (who was born in 1778, when the recollections of Whitefield—who died in 1770—were much less remote than they are to-day, a century-and-a-half later) has given us this sidelight:

Mr. Whitefield had a fine, clear, powerful voice, which enabled him to be heard by a congregation of 20,000 persons, in the open air. That grand voice was often lifted up in the cause of his Divine Master, and for the good of his fellow men, in the neighbourhood of Stroud, and on Hampton Common, where a grassy mound on which he stood and preached is still called Whitefield's tump.

This was written about 70 years ago, and we might comment, in passing, that the mound is still called "Whitefield's Tump," and will doubtless still be so-called if the pastor and congregation of Rodborough Tabernacle celebrate the tri-centenary on July 1st, 2039.

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Old Farmer Cox's Story

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Old Farmer Cox's Story

We have from time to time commented on Fisher's story of the extraordinary range of Whitefield's voice. We were told by a reader who lives not very far away from Rodborough Fort that one of the speakers at an election meeting inside the Stroud Subscription Rooms could be heard distinctly from the open window of her bedroom! This, one would conclude, must have effectively kept the audience awake within the hall, but the amplifier placed on the balcony outside was undoubtedly responsible for the reception at Rodborough. In Whitefield's day, as we have said, there were no artificial aids for the sound producer, and we doubt if a stentor could be produced to-day who could emulate the following oft-quoted feat:

When I was a boy, old farmer Cox, of Fennels, used to tell that as he was passing Nounsell's Cross at the top of the town, in returning home one evening from the market, he distinctly heard Mr. Whitefield preaching to a large congregation, in a field on the opposite—the Painswick—side of the Slad Valley which lay between them. This field is now covered with houses and gardens.

We conclude it would be at what is now known as Uplands that Whitefield was preaching, and to be heard in Summer Street, at "the top of the town," if we are to believe Farmer Cox, was a very remarkable vocal achievement.

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Twenty-four Sermons

The meeting on Minchinhampton Common, two hundred years ago, was held towards the close of Whitefield's great crusade in the Stroud district. His earlier associations as a curate at Stonehouse Church were probably responsible for his zeal for souls in this area. Fisher, it will be recalled, said that during the first twenty-three days of April, 1739, he conducted twenty-four religious services, and preached twenty-four sermons, chiefly in the open air, in addition to the labour of travelling for that purpose in Wales and Gloucestershire.

Among those services, he preached on Friday, the 20th of April, at Chalford—on Saturday morning, in the Bowling-green, Stroud—in the afternoon at Painswick; and the same night in the Booth Hall, Gloucester, to about 3,000 or 4,000 each time: and on Sunday afternoon (although raining) to a very crowded audience in Stonehouse Churchyard.

There were, of course, fewer distractions and preoccupations in those distant days, and a great preacher could always draw a big congregation, but those gatherings addressed by Whitefield in the scattered Stroud district, must have been remarkable even in those revivalist times.