

PLEASANT SUNDAY AFTERNOONS IN LATE VICTORIAN RICHMOND – a glimpse at 1893-4

By Peter Flower

Pleasant Sunday afternoons in Richmond during the last decade of c19th – a picture perhaps of sunny summers boating on the Thames, gentle strolls along the tow path, and a band playing in the gardens beside the Petersham Road?

In fact, the 1890's saw the birth and growth of a significant religious, educational and social movement among men in the town and surrounding area. This was the personal inspiration of Alfred Deayton, a member of the Richmond Congregational Church in The Vineyard, off Hill Rise. Coming back from a visit to Luton in the summer of 1893 he was full of enthusiasm for a 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Meeting' he had attended. He had a burning desire to start something similar in Richmond and the society that he initiated lasted for over 34 years before it petered out in 1927. The twelve months from October 1893-November 1894 reveals a fascinating glimpse of an unknown aspect of Victorian Richmond.

The movement owed its origins to John Blackham, a linen draper from West Bromwich who was a leading light in the religious life of that town. He was a member of the Ebenezer Congregational Church, and became a deacon when he was only 29 years old. In addition, he became active in the early morning Adult School Movement which was prevalent in the Black Country during this period. He had a concern as to how to regain and reclaim the lost older scholars from the churches' Sunday schools.

In 1875, when he was 41, he made a special visit from West Bromwich to nearby Birmingham to hear the well known American evangelists, Moody and Sankey who were speaking at the Town Hall one Sunday afternoon; finding himself unable to get in due to the crowd of 4000 at this meeting he asked about other bible study meetings being held nearby. He was given directions to the Steelhouse Lane Congregational Church which was not far away where he joined thirty young men for a bible study in a church that could have held a thousand. When he reflected on the handful at the church, the erudition and skill of the teacher to whom he listened and why this splendid bible class teacher could only draw about thirty to the meeting, he saw clearly why he had failed and how this could be changed. 'I learnt how not to do it' it is reported that he said later, 'I realized that if men were to be won, we must give them a service neither too long nor too learned. We must avoid dullness, prolixity, gloom and constraint'. As William Ward, who became President of the National Council of PSA Brotherhoods in 1909 said, 'Now Mr Blackham is a man who has visions.....and he distinctly felt that God would show him how to realise his vision'¹.

Back at his West Bromwich chapel he shared his idea at a meeting with the Sunday School officials, and offered to make the experiment of a new form of service on condition they would support him with prayers and give him an entirely free hand. They were happy to back him and he gathered a few friends who went out on to the streets to button hole every man they met who, they thought was an old Sunday school scholar and

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did not attend church. No handbills were given out, no posters put up, but the next Sunday, 120 young men went to the Ebenezer Chapel responding to these personal invitations. Thus was started the first meeting of what became the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon [PSA] movement. The popularity of the meetings spread over the next ten years throughout the Black Country, across the Midlands and then beyond. The first meeting in London were held in 1888 in Tottenham and five years later the movement spread south of the Thames to Richmond in Surrey.

51 year old Deayton was a grocer by trade who lived at the time in Apstey Villas, Hampton Road in Twickenham with his wife Martha, five sons, one daughter and two servants.ⁱⁱ By the 1890's he had moved to Clifden Road, Twickenham. As the 1901 census gave his occupation as Managing



Deaytons Stores, Broad St, Teddington 1903 Director of Deayton Stores Ltd ⁱⁱⁱ, his retailing business had prospered from the original grocer's shop he had started with his brother. The church records

show that he became a member of the Vineyard church

[membership number 114 with Martha being number 115] in April 1891 having moved from the Baptist church in Twickenham¹. This was three months after the Rev Percy Martin^{iv}, who came from East Finchley Congregational Church, was appointed minister of the Richmond church. Given the timing of Martin's appointment and Deayton and his wife's admission, it is likely that they joined the church because of the new pastor. Deayton was elected a deacon in March 1893.

There were two modes of admission for church membership at this time - either 'by profession of faith' [also referred to as 'from the world'] or by transfer from another church. The latter necessitated a formal notification of good standing from a previous church. Whether by profession or by transfer, the Congregational Church articles specified that 'all persons eligible for church membership [must] give evidence of personal trust in Jesus Christ as their Saviour'. In March 1893 a series of mission services had been held locally by Messrs Fullerton and Smith, well known preachers who belonged to Charles Spurgeon's Society of Evangelists. Martin reported to the church meeting that month that this had resulted in about 60 people 'professing Christ'; he said that he thought 15 or 16 were likely to join the church. The minutes state that 'Mr Deayton thoroughly concurred in this'. The following month, 16 new members were proposed for church membership at a special church meeting; of these two were Sydney

¹ Also admitted to church membership at the same time were four of their children – Annie aged 25, Frederick, aged 22, Leonard aged 18 and Harry aged 17.

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Deayton aged 15 and Edward Deayton aged 13. All Alfred and Martha's children had now committed their lives to Christ. Given the evangelistic heart of the PSA movement, it is likely that Deayton's faith inspired him to promote the movement in Richmond just two years after joining the church. He certainly got Martin, others within the Congregational church, as well as those in other churches in the area enthused by the potential of the PSA movement to reach the unchurched.

John Blackham, in his discussions with the young men that he came across on the streets in West Bromwich asked some of them what sort of bible class they would go to rather than to a horse race or a cock fight. The answer was apparently that they had 'nothing against the Bible but did the services in church need to be so blessed dull?' This answer caused him to use the word 'pleasant' when describing the meetings and he determined they should also be short and bright and last only three-quarters of an hour. As later recounted by William Ward, the words 'Brief, Bright and Brotherly' occurred to Mr Blackham as happily expressing the special features of the work, together with the Scriptural motto "One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren."²

Blackham's first vision was of the meeting in his church in West Bromwich; but he had another, that of 'five millions gathered together in the societies round the open Bible every Sunday afternoon'. 'At the very outset,' he said, 'I attributed all our success to prayer. Prayer is our sheet anchor, the vision of 5 millions will be realized, for with God all things are possible'^v. And prayer was the anchor of the meetings that began to be held in the autumn of 1893 in Richmond as a number of enthusiasts came together under the chair of Rev Percy Martin in the Congregational Church in Richmond. As the first Committee minute book³ recounts, 'The Church and congregation having unanimously agreed to start Pleasant Sunday Afternoons for the people of Richmond, the following gentlemen were appointed a Committee with power to add to their number' ...and nine names were recorded, including Deayton's. It is not clear how many of these were Vineyard Church members, but it is clear that from the start the PSA was quite separate

from the church and paid the church an amount for the use of the premises. During the next year, the PSA Steering Committee asked the officers of the church if they had any objection to a box being placed in the vestibule for contributions to the PSA fund and this request was agreed. However, the church clearly put its weight behind the new initiative as the deacons agreed to

*Richmond P. S. A.
Vineyard Congregational Church*

President, Rev. P. Martin B. A.

The Church & congregation having unanimously agreed to start Pleasant Sunday Afternoons for the people of Richmond, the following gentlemen were appointed a Committee with power to add to their number

² 'But you are not to be called Rabbi for you only have one Master and you are all brothers'. Gospel of Matthew

Chapter 23 Verse 8, New International Version, 1984.

³ The Minute record of the inaugural meeting to establish a Steering Committee is undated but must have been at the end of September 1893 as the first meeting of the Steering Committee was held on October 6th 1893. Deaton's name appears at the end of the list of names, in pencil for some unknown reason.

- " *Wells*
- " *Graves*
- " *Gregory*
- " *P. King*
- " *Rumelton*
- " *Spang*

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advise the church to bear half the expenses incurred by the PSA in buying hymn books and making the room ‘comfortable for the Bible class downstairs.’ However, towards the end of the first year a request was made to the church that in future the PSA ‘would be charged so much per night instead of so much per week, as

Undated Minute Book record 1893

some evenings when other things took place, the classes could not be held and we seem to be paying for something for that which we could not obtain’. Nevertheless, relations with the church were cordial and it would appear that many of those involved in the PSA in this first year were members of the church itself.

Commenting a year later at the first Annual General Meeting in November 1894, Martin, who had been elected President from the start said that ‘our motto has been fully adhered to in being brief, bright and brotherly. The great aim we had in view was to bring in those who were not connected with any place of worship’. He went on to say that the intent of all involved was to make ‘everyone feel that they are midst of those who love and care for them, temporarily and spiritually.’ Interestingly, right from the beginning the minute books record that each member was addressed as ‘brother’.

Loosing no time, the first Steering Committee meeting was held on October 5th with Mr Whitbread, the Church Sunday School Superintendent, Mrs Davis, President of the Bible Class and Mrs Gregory, the Senior Class Teacher in attendance. A place to hold the PSA meetings needed to be found and as the bible classes used the main church building on Sunday afternoons, discussions took place to explore if the classes could meet in the old school room in the church basement instead. The teachers were gracious in agreeing to move; work was later commissioned to make the room used by the Bible class more comfortable – painting, curtains and seating was taken from the Lecture Hall (now the church’s Side Hall) downstairs to the basement.

The Committee decided immediately to order 100 double sided bills to publicise the PSA. The Committee got off to a flying start, meeting six times in October, and four in November when the first public meeting was held. Initially, the Committee was asked to ‘collect or guarantee the sum of 10/- towards the expenses incurred in starting the movement which the majority present promised to do’. By mid November it was reported that £3-6s-0d had been received as donations for the work. By January, Deayton gave a financial report which was ‘very promising’. Besides fundraising activities such as concerts, members paid a subscription to join the PSA. There is no record of the accounts over the first year, but at the end of the second year there was a balance in hand of £3-15s-5d which was considered healthy.

Publicising the new society was a high priority and 100 bills were printed and arrangements made about placing some of them at the railway station. Sample hymn books were produced by Deayton for use at the planned Sunday afternoon meetings and it

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was agreed to purchase 500 of them. Clearly, in a step of faith, large numbers were anticipated coming to the Sunday afternoon meetings. Deayton took up the role of Treasurer early on. Plans were discussed about the musical content of services and organising concerts with an orchestra and choir. At a later meeting, 20,000 handbills were printed for £2.0.0 from the Express Office at Kingston. A Mr Hains undertook to arrange their distribution across 30 designated districts. Arrangements were also made to place 3 bills (or posters) at the railway station - a big one at the 'up' platform, one at the 'down' platform at the old station and one at Kew station for 2 months for 15/s 0d.

Martin undertook to get handbills distributed to travellers on the early morning trains, and also to place them in the public houses wherever possible while Deayton agreed to 'supply the early trains at Twickenham'. 10 sandwich men were employed on the Saturday before the first PSA meeting 'with special bills giving full particulars to be obtained of Richmond and Twickenham Times [sic]'.

Much work was spent on organising speakers for the weekly meetings from a variety of different sources during these early months; Deayton organised some of these himself as well as offering early in March to give a lecture on his trip to America. It is not clear whether this was a business visit or a holiday visit. Sir Richard Temple^{vi}, MP for Kingston, was booked to give an address in June entitled 'Jerusalem to Capernaum' and the Committee agreed that 2000 handbills should be printed announcing the meeting. Besides visiting speakers, the question of holding open meetings at which members could speak was discussed by the Committee and it was unanimously agreed in the New Year that a meeting of this type should take place on the 2nd Sunday in March; the proviso was that five minutes only would be allowed for any three members to speak giving notice of the subject not 'later than Thursday Feb 22nd to the President'. In fact, only two members gave notice of wanting to speak at the open meeting but the subject of their topics was not recorded.

The Sunday afternoon service meetings incorporated worship and an address by a speaker; after only a month or two it was resolved that 'amen be not sung after the hymns on Sunday afternoons'. A few months later, Martin, as President told the Committee meeting that in future 'two hymns should be chosen by him so as the orchestra might practice on the Monday evenings.' Blackham, with his desire to keep proceedings brief and bright, would have approved no doubt. His desire that men should be reached with the gospel was very much at the heart of the Richmond PSA for quite early on it was agreed to encourage members to meet 'together for prayer & bible study – on Friday evenings at 8.30 pm sharp'. But not all the activities were specifically religious. A public



Percy Martin, 1891-1900.

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meeting was planned for Jan 24th at 7.00 pm and it was agreed to ‘have sandwiches and tea afterwards in preference to knife and fork supper cutting from the joints as it was thought the expense would be too much to incur at present.’ Members were admitted by a 6d ticket. In April the Committee discussed the idea of swimming and boating clubs for members and it was with gratitude that it was recorded that a billiard table had been donated to the PSA by Mrs Phillips who had left Richmond. The idea of an outing for members was slow to get off the ground in the first year as too few members were interested in a planned excursion by train to Guildford. It was only in later years that excursions took place - by brake to Box Hill and by train to Staines being two outings that were organised.

The idea of a special social club did not get raised until September 1895 when ‘subject to the consent of the Pastor and officers of the church’ it was agreed that a Social Club should be started. This would be non-smoking, non-alcoholic, non-gambling, where games, literary papers and occasional refreshments as well as evening concerts among members would be allowed the members be allowed for two evenings a week.’

Providing practical help to members who fell on hard times was developed some five years later with the setting up of a ‘Helping Hand Fund’. The Committee overseeing the fund gave grants of money and interest free loans to ‘assist cases of distress arising from misfortune, sickness etc amongst the members or to a widow in [the] case of the death of a member’. By the end of the First World War the number of such funds or clubs within the PSA had expanded to include the Coal Club, Sick Club, and Thrift Club.

But it was in the provision of further education that a variety of initiatives were explored during the PSA’s first year. Over twenty years previously the Elementary Education Act of 1870 initiated a national elementary education framework for all children aged 5-13 for the first time; in 1880, attendance became compulsory in law. A generation of young men and women had thus grown into adulthood that were able to read, write and think for themselves but lacked any secondary education. Many had a thirst for greater knowledge and education but public resources were limited, despite the development of Working Men’s Institutes. The PSA was able to provide an outlet for the thirst of these young people for education, culture and an understanding of life.

Concerts played an important role in the life of the PSA from the start – no doubt for enjoyment but also to raise funds. The orchestra that was formed met every Monday evening to practice. The possibility of science and art classes was discussed by the Committee in August 1894 and by the autumn it was agreed that classes for both sexes should be held in the schoolroom in the church basement in bookkeeping, shorthand, singing, drawing, literacy, Ladies Ambulance⁴ and Men’s Ambulance. Given that electric

⁴ First aid courses run by the Richmond Centre St Johns Ambulance Association which donated £2.0.0. towards working expenses.

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lighting was only installed in the church building in 1896, these classes would have been held by candlelight during the winter months for several years. That these classes were for both men and women is interesting in the light of the resolution put to the General meeting in September 1894. This was that ladies should be admitted to the gallery of the church on Sunday afternoons once a month; the resolution was voted down by a small margin. By contrast, the Steering Committee had previously suggested that a 'lady speaker, lady soloist, lady reader and a lady to engage in prayer should be obtained to take one Sunday service'. This was to encourage those ladies who 'feel disposed to help in our movement.' However, women were not allowed to participate in full until 1902, when a resolution was finally passed that they should be admitted as members of the Richmond PSA.



At the first Annual General Meeting held one Wednesday evening in November 1894 at the Vineyard Church, over 100 members were in attendance and it was reported that there were Photo of a typical PSA meeting at this period– Kilsyth in Scotland.

126 members on the books. Those elected for office comprised a

President (Martin) two Vice Presidents, a Treasurer (Deayton), a secretary, an orchestra conductor as well as a platform committee (the officers plus two others elected). Four members were elected as Attendance Registrars, six as Stewards, five as Sick Visitors and one as the Society Registrar. The press report of the first annual meeting in the Richmond and Twickenham Times of November 10th stated that: 'the tone of the meeting was distinctly religious, but throughout there was a delicious absence of stiffness and formality. There was frequent and hearty laughter, and the salient points and the address were greeted with rounds of applause, and the men that were present plainly showed the deep interest they felt in the meeting'.

The 'distinctly religious character' of that first annual meeting was reflected in Martin's address. Commenting on the PSA mission to reach those who did not attend church, he said 'and to some extent we have succeeded, feeling that this, the commencement of a new year gives us great cause to rejoice and take heart for the future, believing that much may yet be done by introducing new members and making everyone feel that they are in

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the midst of those that love and care for them, temporally and spiritually. While acknowledging the repeated kindness from friends far and near in speaking and singing for us, we also give Him praise who has enabled us thus far to carry out that which we believe was His divine mission of lifting the fallen and cheering the faint and gathering all into that fold where class and creed are not known.’

After the meeting formalities, a ‘hearty vote of thanks was given to all who had served during the year’; afterwards, everyone adjourned to the schoolroom below the main church where a committee (of ladies) had ‘been busily employed in arranging a capital supper’. There followed a programme of impromptu character – musical solos, recitations; songs etc. concluded by the singing of the National Anthem.

By the end of 1894, the Richmond PSA was well and truly established. Deayton was doubtless very pleased.^{vii} The growth of other PSA’s in surrounding areas was still to come.^{viii}

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Peter Flower has a B.A. Hons in modern history from London University and is an Associate of Kings College London.

ⁱ William Ward, *Brotherhood and Democracy* 1910.

ⁱⁱ National Census 1881. Strangely, Deayton and his family do not appear in the 1891 census returns at all.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alfred Deayton's brother Charles was a joint owner of the business; he was an elder at Teddington Baptist church for some years and died aged 75 in 1916. The original grocery shop started in 1859 grew into what was to become a small department chain of four shops, three in Twickenham and one in Teddington. A store catalogue of 1902 advertises a range of grocery and other products, such as glassware, tea services and such like, with a delivery service by cart or van to Ashford, East Mosley, Hampton Court and Kingston.

^{iv} During the first year of the PSA, Martin found time to get married in April 1894 to Edith Lewis. Under his ministry until he moved to Muswell Hill in 1900, the church saw substantial growth. The 1899 Church Manual lists 148 members, with 122 children on the Sunday list averaging 41 children in the morning and 81 in the afternoon. Other activities included the Band of Hope, Juvenile Dorcas Society, the (adult) Dorcas Society, the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour, a Sick Visiting Society, a Bible Class, Choir and, of course, the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Society.

^v Ibid William Ward.

^{vi} Sir Richard Temple served with distinction in the Indian Civil Service and became Governor of Bengal before he returned to England and was Conservative MP for Evesham. He was elected to the Kingston constituency in 1892, retired in 1895 and became a Privy Councillor the following year.

^{vii} During the nineteen years that he belonged to the Vineyard Church Deayton served as church secretary, deacon, delegate to the Congregational Union of England and Wales, the London Congregational Union, as well as the District Committee of the Surrey Congregational Union.

He was also responsible for the Church Sittings or pew rents. He left the church by transfer to Twickenham Green in January 1912.

^{viii} A Thames Valley Association leaflet containing the constitution of this local body shows that by 1918, there were 'PSA's, Brotherhoods or Kindred Societies' at Isleworth, Mortlake, Teddington, Twickenham, Raleigh Road, and Staines as well as at the Richmond Vineyard Church. In 2008, none exist in this part of England although two societies still survive at Eltham Park Methodist Church and Sandown Baptist Church on the Isle of Wight.

^{ix} The records of each meeting are meticulously minuted with the formality of motions being proposed, seconded and voted on in a manner rarely seen today in most meetings of societies or similar bodies.