

A ‘Brilliant Spectacle’: Basingstoke’s Grand “Reformation Times” Bazaar 1903

A ‘Ten-Minute Talk’ for the British Association for Local History by Roger Ottewill

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A ‘brilliant spectacle’ was the phrase used by the *Hants and Berks Gazette* to describe the grand “Reformation Times” bazaar held in Basingstoke’s Drill Hall on Wednesday and Thursday, 4th and 5th March 1903. Even allowing for a touch of journalistic hyperbole, the language, coupled with the substantial amount of newsprint devoted to the bazaar, indicates that it was a noteworthy event in the life of the town. The net sum raised was £278 or over £20,000 in today’s terms, so from a fund raising perspective it was very successful.

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In *Within Living Memory*, published in 1968, Diana Stanley describes Basingstoke, situated in north-east Hampshire, as:

... a small compact town surrounded by farms and woodlands stretching for miles around, all mutually bound together by agricultural and forestry activities into a single entity. Town served country and the country supplied the town in an inseparable dependency.

What she did not mention was that during the second half of the 19th century it was also a rapidly industrialising town, facilitated by its location as a railway transport hub with lines to Southampton, the South West and the Midlands and North via Reading. Indeed, its population more than doubled between 1851 and 1901, from 4263 to 9510.

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The bazaar was organised by London Street Congregational Church, which was 'generally regarded as the chief Nonconformist place of worship in the town' (*Hants and Berks Gazette*, 14 November 1908). By 1903 it had 213 members, 526 Sunday School Scholars, 51 Sunday school teachers and 33 lay preachers. A census of churchgoing carried out shortly after the bazaar recorded nearly 400 worshippers at the morning service and 500 at the evening (*Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 March 1903). Numerically it was clearly a force to be reckoned with and in the Rev Capes Tarbolton, minister since 1887, it had an effective leader. Described in a brochure to mark the Church's triple jubilee celebrations in 1950 as 'a man of gentle spirit, quiet enthusiasm, broad culture, and poetic genius', he enjoyed 'the confidence and affection of a united and loyal congregation'.

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Members of London Street, some of whom are shown in this photograph at another Church event held in 1907, took the lead in making the arrangements for the bazaar. Here a strong element of gender demarcation was evident. As it was put in the *Hants and Berks Gazette*:

Assisted by a Committee of gentlemen as far as their comparatively limited capacities enable them to help in the affair which depend[ed] largely for its success upon women's skill and industry, the ladies worked at their task with such remarkable enthusiasm and unity that we may safely aver that few undertakings of this kind have had a more brilliant issue.

Although somewhat patronising to modern ears, the bazaar provided the women of the Church with an opportunity to bond, demonstrate their usefulness and encourage those who attended the bazaar to spend.

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The bazaar was intended to raise funds in support of evangelistic enterprise in poorer, mainly rural, parts of the county. This was to be achieved by channelling them:

- through the Hampshire Congregational Union to support smaller chapels struggling to make ends meet;
- to the six village causes for which London Street had direct responsibility at Ellisfield, Farleigh Wallop, Mapledurwell, Pyotts Hill, Winslade and Worting; and
- to support the purchase of a Mission Hall in a poorer part of Basingstoke, achieved in 1913 by acquiring premises previously occupied by Basingstoke's Railway Mission.

Thus, the bazaar had overtly religious goals

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As the official handbook made clear the rules of the bazaar embraced a number of clear moral principles, reflecting the influence of the Nonconformist Conscience. There were to be no 'unfair prices'; no raffles; no obtaining money under false pretences; and no one was to be 'unduly bothered to buy', so everyone could 'enjoy the bazaar in peace.' Moreover, it did not need saying that, with temperance being very much to the fore, alcohol was strictly forbidden. Notwithstanding these constraints no expense was spared in creating an ambience that reflected the Reformation theme and ensuring a memorable experience for all those who attended. This included the female stallholders being attired in costumes 'illustrative of various Periods and Countries of the Reformation'; music; *tableaux vivant*; conjuring; and competitions; as well as an art gallery, fairy well, fish pond, and a bandstand.

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The opening ceremony was a grand affair attended by the Earl and Countess of Portsmouth. It consisted of a hymn, prayers and a belligerent address by the Earl. Although an Anglican, he was a vigorous opponent of the highly controversial Education Act 1902, which was seen as privileging the Church of England at the expense of Nonconformists. '[H]e argued that if the principles of freedom and ... of Nonconformity ... [were] to be respected ... Nonconformity must show that it ... [was] a political force, a fighting force (hear, hear). If it submit[ted] to injustice of this kind ... I think its religious influence will be considerably reduced, and as regards political and public influence, it will cease to exist (hear, hear)'. Clearly, the bazaar was by no means free from politics.

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Many of those attending the bazaar would have passed through Basingstoke's Market Square with its notable Town Hall opened in 1832. They were drawn from every section of the community with all denominations, including Anglicans, being represented. Thus, it was a truly communal affair and a good example of the contradictions in the Nonconformist psyche, to which Jeffrey Cox has drawn attention in his book *The English Churches in a Secular Society*. While Nonconformists might have been characterised as killjoys, with their commitment to temperance and Sunday observance, they provided 'entertainment for the general community more readily than the Anglicans.' Thus, notwithstanding the religious theme of the bazaar, London Street sought to counteract any thoughts of abstemiousness by creating a 'picturesque and animated scene' for all.

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Unfortunately, no illustrations of the bazaar have been found. However, there is one for an earlier “Puritan” bazaar organised by the same Church in 1888. In its comments on the “Reformation Times” bazaar, the *Hants and Berks Gazette* observed that it was ‘necessary to go back some fifteen years to the “Puritan” Bazaar ... to find an event to compare with it in its artistic features or to surpass it in its financial success.’ Moreover, bazaars were by no means the sole preserve of the Congregationalists of Basingstoke, for later in 1903 the Wesleyan Methodists organised a British Empire Bazaar, which raised just under £222.

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In the years following the bazaar, fund raising for a variety of causes, such as a new hall alongside the Church in May Place and a new organ continued to preoccupy the members of London Street. Bazaars were held at frequent intervals with one in 1934 being described as an ‘amazing success’. Fast forward to 1972 and London Street Congregational Church became London Street United Reformed Church which continues to this day. The premises are still instantly recognisable and remain a distinctive feature of Basingstoke’s built environment.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations are from the *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 March 1903.
2. For a more detailed analysis of the bazaar see Roger Ottewill, ‘Basingstoke’s Grand “Reformation Times” Bazaar 1903: Aspiring Congregationalism’, *Congregational History Society Magazine*, Vol.5(5), Spring 2009, pp. 305-17. Available at: <https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/chcm/05-5.pdf>
3. Roger Ottewill is a member of the new Victoria County History project team currently researching the history of Basingstoke and a number of surrounding parishes. He can be contacted on rogerottewill@btinternet.com.

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