Religion in the City: Christian Philanthropy and the City 1830-1850
Transcript

Date: Monday, 4 April 2005 - 12:00AM
CHRISTIAN PHILANTHROPY IN LONDON 1830-1850

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On Monday 4th August 1845 eleven men held a meeting in the chapel of the newly created cemetery at Abney Park, Stoke Newington. The City's graveyards were full to overflowing and good Christian philanthropists had set about creating new cemeteries in the suburbs and country villages around London. The good Christian philanthropists meeting on this occasion had made their money in the City and were primarily Dissenters, always strongly represented in London. Abney Park was planned as a non-denominational cemetery and, as a consequence, was much patronised by Dissenters, replacing their previous burial ground of choice, Bunhill Fields. The new cemetery at Abney Park was launched as a joint stock company. The philanthropists had a duty to see that there was a reasonable return on the capital invested. The old mansion of the Abney family was demolished when the cemetery was created. It had been the home not only of the Abneys but of their long-time guest, Isaac Watts, the celebrated hymn writer and dissenting divine. The cemetery company had acceded to the request of a committee formed to erect a monument to the memory of Isaac Watts at Abney Park and the meeting was held to determine the site. It was a meeting of some of the most powerful and influential people in the City of London. This was the Diana, Princess of Wales, monument of the 1840s. The artist, who was present, was Edward Hedges Bailey (1788-1867), the most celebrated monumental sculptor of the day, the man who put Nelson on his column in Trafalgar Square.

So who were the other ten people? In the chair and representing the company was Alderman Kelly. Thomas Kelly (1772-1855) was a Dick Whittington character, a man who had risen from modest beginnings to be Lord Mayor and a respected Alderman. After his father's bankruptcy, in about 1788, Kelly was sent to work at Hoggs, the publisher and bookseller, on Paternoster Row. He attended the French Protestant Church in Threadneedle St but also heard Evangelical preachers in the City and at St John’s, Bedford Row. Kelly was a Christian entrepreneur of the highest order. A publisher by trade, he had exploited the new technology of stereotyping to produce thousands of cheap copies of the Bible, with a popular commentary by Revd John Malham, as a part-work. At the same time he had developed a sales force which went from door to door promoting this edition. It had made him a fortune. His Bibles actually cost more than conventional one-volume editions but were available to buy in cheap instalments, 173 parts at 8d each. From Bibles he went on to other universal texts, such as Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, before turning to the street directories, with which his name is popularly associated. Kelly was a Low Church Anglican and had combined faith and works to enrich himself vastly. It is estimated that he grossed over £400,000 from his Bible alone. By the 1840s Kelly was in semi-retirement in Streatham but he was a vigorous promoter of the Abney Park Cemetery. He had a good record on statues, having recently presided over the commissioning of Sir Francis Chantrey's representation of Wellington. Also representing the company was Alderman Hunter, another former Lord Mayor, and John Foulger, a Cape merchant and a Dissenter (d1850). Foulger, who had an oil business on Ratcliff Highway, had also quit the City, in his case for Walthamstow. Foulger held the largest single block of shares in the Abney Park Cemetery Company. With Hunter he served on the Board of the London Missionary Society, who had recently taken the risk of sending a young man called David Livingstone to work for them in Africa. The fourth Director of the company at this meeting was Revd James Sherman (1796-1862), minister of the Surrey Chapel, across the river from the City in Southwark. Sherman had been ordained in the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion, always a small denomination but historically strong in the City. Denomination was not important to Sherman. He was a pulpit prince in his own right, an influential commentator on public affairs and amply rewarded by his well-to-do church members. Accompanying these four Directors was the company secretary, John Conquest, a lawyer and son of John Tricker Conquest (1789-1866), a celebrated obstetrician we would now say, though his contemporaries termed him a male midwife. It is to be regretted that these eminent directors were not keeping a closer eye on their company secretary, for John Conquest would shortly abscond with a large sum of money, but that is another story.

From the Isaac Watts Monument Committee came three people who were also shareholders in the company. These were William Alers Hankey (1771-1859); a City merchant and a dissenter, Ebenezer Clarke of Snaresbrook (1797-1875), Secretary to the committee and Secretary to the Hall of Commerce in Threadneedle Street; and William Copeland Astbury, who had an interest in the firm of Copeland and Garrett, the successors to Josiah Spode, run by Astbury's cousin, William Taylor Copeland, another former Lord Mayor. Two remaining members of the committee, though not shareholders, were a Mr Moore of Camden and a Dr William Camps of Park Lane. Foulger, Kelly and Sherman were also members of the memorial committee but on this
The meeting was highly successful. A site was agreed in the centre of the cemetery, where the monument may be seen to this day, though the chapel where the meeting was held is now in poor shape. These business-like Christians do not seem to have anticipated that running a cemetery as a joint-stock company might present a problem once the principal asset, the land, has all been assigned. Or perhaps they assumed that families would always be ready to contribute to cemetery maintenance. In 1845 the cemetery was a success, the site for the monument was agreed and the little meeting of the great and good dispersed, using the highly successful transport system that had developed in the previous decade, the horse-drawn omnibus. The record of the meeting on which this account is based rests not in the company records, which have long since disappeared, but in the account kept in his Journal by William Astbury. It is this hitherto unknown source which will form the thread linking these observations on the City and Christian philanthropy.

William Copeland Astbury was born in 1783 in Staffordshire but came to London with his parents as a boy. His mother was a Copeland, sister of that William Copeland who acted as Josiah Spode’s partner in London. William Astbury went to work with his uncle Copeland once his schooling was finished. By now the firm of Spode and Copeland worked out of Copeland’s London house in Lincolns Inn Fields, which was eventually sold to the Royal College of Surgeons, who occupy the site today. Behind the house, facing onto Portugal Street, was an old theatre used as a Warehouse by Copeland. When his uncle died although William Astbury retained an interest in the firm, his cousin William Taylor Copeland took as his partner in the business William Garrett. Astbury fought a losing battle with his Christian duty of charity towards Garrett and could not resist some feelings of satisfaction when the partnership eventually broke up with recriminations all round. Garrett had two factors working in his favour. Firstly that he was friendly with William Taylor Copeland and a particular favourite of his mother. Secondly that Copeland regarded his cousin Astbury as too religious by far. “A methodistical” person, as he once characterised Astbury behind his back, was hardly going to be a boon companion for a man who ran shooting parties and kept a string of racehorses. William Taylor Copeland was conventionally religious when necessary - these were times when a Lord Mayor was expected to be a church-goer - but he also liked the high life, parties, speculative business and the turf. Copeland was a close friend of Carr Glyn, proprietor of Glyn’s Bank, and at the time when other worthy City figures were committed to raising a monument to Isaac Watts, these two were much more concerned with railway speculation. So cousin Astbury was a good man to send down to the City with the day's banking or to carry out the inventory on a fashionable house which the Copelands might take for the season, but not a partner for risky investments, or a house-guest for the race-meeting. That said, Copeland did his Christian duty, He pensioned off loyal employees and he allowed Astbury to run a branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society in the Warehouse. He also permitted the distribution of Christian tracts in the manufactory at Stoke. These were the shibboleths of any decent City merchant at that time and it might help reduce the number of strikes.

But Astbury and the Evangelical Christians like him wished to go further than the conventional religious responses. The role of the City in developing Christian work with young men has been admirably set out in Professor Clyde Binfield’s book “George Williams and the YMCA”, so this will not be retold here. The pivotal role of the Scot, David Nasmith, in broadening the Evangelical social agenda is part of that story. Astbury was a friend of Nasmith and deeply influenced by him. As important to Nasmith as societies for young men were, his principal creation was the London City Mission, whose object was to bring the Bible and the Gospel to the urban poor. Auxiliary to this mission were District Visiting Societies, which, unlike the London City Mission, have long since ceased. Arising also from the London City Mission work was the attempt to help young women, especially those caught up in prostitution, for whom Nasmith formed the London Female Mission. Through Astbury's Journal we can see more of these forgotten aspects of Christian philanthropy in the 1830s and 40s. It is true that we have accounts of attempts to end prostitution later in the nineteenth century, but the experience of the pioneers is not so easily available. District Visiting Societies, with which we begin, have all but disappeared from the corporate Christian memory.

In 1829 Astbury, with his younger brother James and his younger sister, Hannah, set up house in Camden Town, then a developing suburb of London. Astbury enjoyed a daily walk, so where better to live than on the edge of Regents Park, with possible excursions to Primrose Hill, out to the village of Highgate, or to Hampstead Heath, or a walk along the canal to St Johns Wood, even to the point where the canal met the Thames at Chelsea, “a beautiful spot” according to Astbury. If the modern reader finds it hard to imagine Lots Road, Chelsea as picturesque, an even greater degree of imagination is required to visualise the first lodgings the Astbury’s took, with Messrs Simons at Camden Wharf, where there was a coal business. These would not seem to be ideal for someone looking for the country air. It is easy to forget that for the early Victorians, especially the middle-classes, machinery and commerce could be beautiful things. A print of the opening of the Chalk Farm cutting on the Birmingham railway shows a rural scene with an admiring crowd of spectators. In his time in Camden Astbury watched the building of this railway with interest and took every opportunity to travel on railways as they were opened. Omnibuses, railways,
steamboat services on the Thames - all these were fascinating to Astbury. When he and his siblings moved from Camden Wharf it was not because they wanted to move but because it suited the new owners, the Murphy family, who were Roman Catholics. The Astburys then took a house on Camden High St. Hannah Astbury regularly attended the Independent or Congregational Chapel which served Camden Town. William divided his time between the Independent, Wesleyan and Episcopal chapels of ease serving the developing district. On occasion he would walk into the City to attend a Quaker meeting.

Camden Town was a diverse community in the early 1830s. There were middle class people like Astbury, living on independent means or taking the omnibus down to their place of business in the City. There were local business men and tradesmen, ranging from a linoleum warehouse through joiners and chemists to the dairies which supplied London’s milk. A great many of London’s pianos were made in Camden Town and jobbing artists, who specialised in book illustrations, tended to congregate there. There was the barracks in Regent’s Park, St Katherine’s Hospital, transplanted from the docks and the new University College Hospital. There were the servants and labourers who worked for the middle classes and local firms. Then there were the unemployed, particularly the aged and widows with children at home, dependent on the kindness of others, begging or criminality to make ends meet. Speculative building in the 1830s and 40s drove out some of the well-to-do and urbanised what had been a rural suburb, with its own Veterinary College. Astbury himself would retreat to Fulham in 1844. Today people look to governments to shape social policy and address the needs of those who barely subsist by their own efforts. In the 1830s and 40s it was very different. In 1842 the population of St Pancras parish, including Camden and Kentish Towns, was 130,000, an increase of 30% in a decade. The system of parish relief, dating back to Elizabethan statutes, was breaking down, even in country districts. Government would be driven to act, creating the workhouse system. Workhouses were seen as the last resort. Voluntary activity was the only other remedy available to lift social casualties back to self-sufficiency. To Astbury and his contemporaries it was wholly proper that the Christian public should expect to give for the relief of distress and poverty alongside tract distribution and preaching. Transform the inner person with the Gospel message and the outer person would flourish, thus removing the need for welfare provision.

Astbury was not alone in this classic Liberalism, that is to say, a belief in a minimalist state. In September 1842 one of Astbury’s friends was blaming the recent re-introduction of Income Tax, at the iniquitous rate of 6d in the pound, for a falling off in charitable subscriptions. In 1843 the majority of Dissenters resisted the education provisions of the Factory Bill because state subsidies for education would favour the established church at their expense. Voluntarism set the agenda. We should not therefore be surprised to see William Astbury devoting a great deal of his spare time to the promotion of the Camden Town District Visiting Society, based on Nasmith’s principles. The General Society for Promoting District Visiting had begun in 1828 to promote a network of Christian care across London and Nasmith’s London City Mission of 1835 inspired new local groups. The wealthier members of the community were expected to subscribe to a fund for the relief of the poor. District Visitors, usually middle-class women, would visit the poor in their homes to pray with them, distribute Bibles and tracts, and assess their physical needs before making gifts, usually a voucher cashable for goods at a local shop. Subscribers had the right to draw attention to cases of poverty which they felt to be particularly deserving. District Visiting Societies were trying to make good the shortfall in pastoral care in urban areas. Camden Town was ecclesiastically part of the parish of St Pancras. As the new vicar, Revd Henry Hughes, pointed out in 1845, he and his curates were expected to minister to a population greater than that of the whole of Herefordshire. In Jamaica the ratio of clergy to population was 1 to 6,000 and the missionary societies were appealing for funds to remedy this situation. In St Pancras there was 1 clergyman to every 10,000 people. Even if, grudgingly, one allowed for the Dissenters, there was still a massive under-provision of pastoral care and places of worship. For those Evangelicals who supported the London City Mission the answer was clear. Town missionaries needed to be employed and voluntary Christian service mobilised. All this required local committees, treasurers, annual reports and a steady stream of subscribers.

Who were these subscribers in Camden? We know from another entry that the Camden Town Visiting Society dates from 1837, but unfortunately there is a gap in Astbury’s journal at the particular time. He says in a later entry that he formed it in conjunction with David Nasmith in 1837. This corresponds with what we know of Nasmith resigning as Secretary of the London City Mission in 1837, partly in order to retain support for it from the Church of England. Nasmith then formed the British and Foreign Town Missions Society to keep the inter-denominational principle secure. Astbury certainly had a continuing concern to keep the Camden Town District Visiting Society non-denominational. We join the Society in June 1842 when Astbury is concluding one of his spells of working each day for Copeland and Garrett. This allowed him to resume the formal entry of his journal notes. It is at this period that we learn most about the workings of the Visiting Society and the other charitable activity we shall study, the North Western District Asylum for Penitent Females. The Camden Town Visiting Society Committee met on Friday evening 17 th June 1842 at Mr Woodman’s “as usual”. Richard Woodman (1784-1859), the Secretary of the Society, made his living by engraving and portraiture and his wife Ann, who was also present, was the daughter of the sculptor Charles Horwell. Woodman’s usual subjects were sporting or theatrical scenes, not quite the pictures Astbury would admire, though the visual
arts did attract him, along with serious literature. Woodman was now, like Astbury, in his late fifties. Also present at the June meeting were Miss Skinner, daughter of the Revd John Skinner, a Congregational minister employed by the British and Foreign Bible Society; a Mr Holland, converted by the idiosyncratic evangelist William Huntington, but who now worshipped at the Independent Chapel; and a Mr Hopps. We also know that the committee included Revd Thomas William Gittens, a local upholsterer who had formed the Independent Chapel in Camden Town and who retired from business in 1842 to act as full time minister; and Alexander Miller, superintendent of the recently opened Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park, who succeeded Woodman as Secretary in 1842. Holland and Astbury were also active in promoting the Camden Town Monthly Tract Society, which had been formed by Nasmith and Astbury. Further committee members were a Miss Rickwood, Samuel Kidd, professor of Chinese at University College, London, and Mr George Murphy, a coal merchant. A Thomas Wilcox junior acted as sub-treasurer.

The first duty of a District Visiting Society Committee was to collect subscriptions. This involved calling on the wealthier members of the community in an upmarket version of the door to door collection. We know something about the subscribers because as Treasurer Astbury often noted in his journal when a subscription was sent to him and he enters it in the books. Mr John B Pope of Mornington Crescent, a coal factor, Joseph Claypon Esq of The Elms, Hampstead, benefactor of the London City Mission, and Mr Stevens, Secretary of Kings College Hospital are all mentioned in this way. A Mr William Benacroft of Melbourne Cottage, Crescent Place, travelling in the omnibus from Camden Town to Cornhill with Astbury, is talked into giving ten shillings. Another seven subscribers derived their income directly from the City, either as merchants or investors, and four were running businesses in Camden Town.

Voluntarism usually leads to duplication, as a free market in charitable provision arises. It is no surprise to find that Camden Town had a Church District Visiting Society by 1839, a distinctively Anglican challenge to the non-denominational approach favoured by Astbury. There were also Societies associated with a particular congregation, such as the Fitzroy Chapel District Visiting Society and Christ's Chapel District Visiting Society, and the St Clement Danes District Visiting Society, all of which served Camden Town or neighbouring areas. Such societies would solicit subscriptions only within their own constituency but distribute their charity without reference to denomination. The Albany Chapel Visiting Society for relieving the Sick Poor of all denominations at their own dwellings is self-explanatory in its title. Not only were there rival District Visiting Societies but rival brand names for this form of charity. Camden Town probably benefited from the exertions of the Poor Man's Friend Society for the relief and instruction of the Necessitous Poor in Kentish Town and its vicinity. What we may conclude as we multiply the examples is that, in the absence of local or national government welfare services beyond the workhouse, there was a ready market in personal charity.

Just as there was a plurality of societies to which philanthropic subscriptions could be made, those in receipt of benefit might have it from various hands. A “young woman delivered of twins” in Camden Town had help from the Maternity and Church Visiting Society. Astbury sent her 2/6 through a Camden Town District Visiting Society visitor but as from himself, so as not to compromise her chance of more help from the Church Visiting Society.

It would not have been possible for such societies to rise and flourish and melt away, to be replaced by others, if there were no middle class people in London to sit on their committees and fill up their subscription lists. We need a statistician to collate such data as remains in hundreds of local records and the archives of the London City Mission. This might help us to see whether people were more generous with their personal wealth at this period than now. My suspicion is that they were and that Lord Shaftesbury and Charles Dickens are simply the prominent examples of those moved by the poverty evident in London at the time. In order to draw on the charitable impulse the Camden Town District Visiting Society had 1500 annual reports prepared and 800 envelopes in order to canvas its district. Much of the donkey work was carried out by Astbury himself. In February 1843 he tried to persuade the committee to appoint paid help and to join in a canvass of the District to raise funds but they were unwilling to take this on. It would seem that in order to meet the bills of local tradesmen for the previous year a fair bit of money still needed to be raised and the committee, quite naturally, were not prepared to expand the work in order to make it more solvent. Astbury was always ready to trust the Lord in a tight corner. However much of a Puritan he was in other matters he was ready to bet on Providence every time. In the long run, their failure to back him lost the Committee the services of their treasurer. After working hard to raise the funds needed Astbury handed over the administrative work to the sub-treasurer, Thomas Wilcox junior, ordered a suspension of activity by the visitors, and turned his attention to his other philanthropic enterprise, keeping young women out of prostitution.

Since the writings of Sigmund Freud and his followers have been released on the world we all approach these committees of pious Victorian men attempting to end female prostitution with certain wariness. Middle class women, especially Quakers, did take a role in running the voluntary societies which offered help to young women who had turned to the streets to make a living,
or were likely to. However, when it comes to strategic management of institutions, and eventually to legislative proposals, we have to recognise that these were the roles assigned to men at this point in the nineteenth century. The largest Evangelical Christian body for work among the poor of London was the London City Mission. Alongside that organisation the work with women on the streets was spearheaded by the London Female Mission, formed by Nasmith in 1836, though we also find the London Society for the Protection of Young Females and the Female Aid Society. As I said earlier, the public reason for Nasmith’s withdrawal from the London City Mission was the need to keep Anglicans on board. Nasmith was forced out by the resignation of the Anglican, Rev Robert Ainslie, who then succeeded him as Secretary. Ainslie was highly, and justifiably, critical of Nasmith’s organising abilities. Nasmith was good at inspiration, hopeless at what we now call “follow-through”. In the midst of a financial crisis in the London City Mission Nasmith had started up the London Female Mission. This was the last straw for Ainslie; “my confidence has been materially shaken in the prudence, discretion, and judgment of Mr Nasmith.” It was not only that Nasmith simultaneously appealing to the same people to support a multiplying set of societies, but that a close association with the rescue of fallen women would, in Ainslie’s opinion, discredit the London City Mission.

Bear in mind that charities at this stage had no command structure; under voluntarism a hundred flowers bloom and compete for the same light. The London Female Mission, which offered a range of services to women of all ages, was one of a number of local philanthropic enterprises providing asylums or refuges for young women. The young women were first admitted to the Probationary House, which Ainslie judged too close to the main office, where men came and went on London City Mission business. From the Probationary House they were dispersed among the asylums supported by local committees. Within an asylum they would surrender their own clothes for a uniform and be put to domestic work, such as laundering. They were only allowed out under supervision or to go to what we would now term “work-placements”. The ultimate goal was to prepare young women for service in respectable families. Once in employment they were expected to reimburse the Asylum some of the costs of their accommodation and training out of their earnings.

Reading Astbury’s Journal we can see the dynamics of both the London Female Mission, on whose committee he served, and his local Asylum in Camden Town, to which he gave great but unavailing attention. It was not a popular cause then, any more than it is today. It was hard to raise subscriptions and hard to recruit proper staff. Astbury was a key member of the London Female Mission committee, although its public patron was the Marquess of Cholmondeley, supported by Lord Henry Cholmondeley, the Hon William Ashley and the Hon Arthur Kinnaird, later 10th Baron Kinnaird. The financial muscle came from the bankers Joseph Gibbins, a Quaker, and Thompson Hankey, a Congregationalist, whose brother we saw at Abney Park Cemetery. The navy was represented by Sir Henry Hart and the Hon William Waldegrave. Other committee members included Wigram Money, a wealthy nurseryman from Hampstead, and William Ashley’s secretary, Edward Turst Carver, who subsequently married the daughter of John Key, Lord Mayor in 1830. Carver was a neighbour of Astbury in Camden Town and had been Nasmith’s close associate in founding the London City Mission. The Ladies Committee was strong on female relatives of the men – the Marchioness Cholmondeley, Lady Hart and the Misses Waldegrave, for instance.

These committees usually met at the London City Mission office in Red Lion Square, also the base for the Religious Tract Society and other Evangelical charities. The Honorary Secretary was John Blanchard, who also served the Town Mission and Scripture Reader’s Society. George Groser was employed as paid secretary and Richard Eaton as the Travelling Secretary, who drummed up support. The Mission ran a probationary house at 57 White Lion Street, Pentonville, where young women were first lodged and put to work in the Laundry. Dr Isaac Pidduck was the physician, although young women were also patients at the new University College and Kings College Hospitals. Revd William Short of Bloomsbury was the Honorary Chaplain. When Revd J William Gowering, a blind clergyman, was appointed chaplain in 1841 it became a source of conflict. Ashley had offered to pay the chaplain and wanted to do it through the Society. Astbury and others objected that this compromised the non-denominational status of the Society. Ashley and Oswald Moseley wished for Anglican dominance and set forms of prayer. Astbury resisted this and was put out when a set form of prayer was adopted for committee meetings. However, he got his own way with the chaplain. The very protestant but Anglican A S Thelwall was paid as chaplain in 1843, having succeeded Gowering, but the money from Ashley and his friends not being forthcoming in 1844 Thelwall was forced to find other work. He never held a benefice but was eventually appointed Professor of Elocution at Kings College.

In addition to the work of the London Female Mission Astbury put a great deal of effort into supporting the local Camden Town Asylum, both in driving the committee and in leading prayers there on a Sunday evening. We know from various sources that at least thirty-seven young women were inmates at one time or another of the North Western District Penitent Females’ Asylum. The 1841 census shows twelve young women, all described as seamstresses, in residence at the house on Camden St used for the asylum. That seems to be its capacity. Of the total of 37 young women, seven went into service, fulfilling the objective of the place, but two lost their jobs within a year and were made poor again. Seven more were known or suspected of
returning to prostitution. A further six went home, with or without their parents’ encouragement, one of them simply to look after a small brother now that both parents had died. These young women were not simply from London families, but as far afield as Kings Lynn and Portsmouth. Four went to the London Female Mission probationary house when the Camden Town asylum closed. Amongst these four was a young woman who was despatched to Old Windsor poorhouse when pregnant and returned without her baby, though we are not told if it died or was taken from her. A further young woman was employed by the London Female Mission. One was dismissed, one left and the fate of four more is simply not recorded. The remainder are the saddest of all. Sarah James, a long-time resident, died in St George’s in the East workhouse, having left the situation she had obtained when she became too ill to work. Mary Ann Keen was in the same workhouse with her, but did manage to secure a job and leave. Sarah Saggs was sent to St Pancras Infirmary with venereal disease. A young woman known only as Saunders, died in University College Hospital of an unspecified illness. Harriet Teague, who had been a monitress and gone into a situation died of consumption, that is, tuberculosis. Working with similar young women today we would avoid most of the mortality. Otherwise, the success and failure rate is comparable.

William Acton is generally reckoned to be a pioneer in the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and reform of the laws concerning prostitution. Astbury regarded him as too sanguine about the problems. On 14 May 1843 he asked the young women themselves what the consequences were of their life-style.

At conclusion of service & after catechising I asked the inmates successively the question ‘What becomes of the young women who walk the streets?’ I did so on account of assertions made by Mr. W. Acton at last meeting of Legislative Enactment Committee that the majority of them married to working men. The result was rather that they are distributed in various ways. Those who enter on an evil course early say 17 or 18 die at about the age of 27 or 28 average. Many go into keeping. Some of these marry. Many go into hospital & die there? Many both of those who walk the streets & those who having been in keeping are turned off commit suicide. Knew several who have done so. Thus far Guppy, confirmed by Garvey, who added many commit robberies & are sent out of the country. Many go into Penitentiaries & either are reconciled to their friends or obtain situations. Wilkins, gents get tired of them, they get old & go into workhouses. That many who lose their situations who, if they had a home to go to would be preserved. Russell’s remarks were not materially different. Eves’ she said many go into hospitals & return to their evil courses. Others go into Asylums.

As a result of these interviews, which have a Dickensian ring, Astbury prepared his own account of what had happened to young women in order to inform the committee working on the problems of prostitution. Just as Shaftesbury had tired of voluntary efforts to relieve poor and ill-educated children, and began to call for primary legislation to control conditions in the mines and elsewhere, so Astbury and his colleagues in the London Female Mission had realised that they needed fresh laws to help combat the exploitation of young women. Like Shaftesbury, they were to find their Tory friends in parliament were not sympathetic.

An article on the problems of prostitution was published in the Quarterly Review in 1843 and extensively quoted in the London City Mission report for that year. Figures from the Lock Hospital suggest that Astbury had a better appreciation of the situation than Acton. The Lock surveyed 289 patients discharged over the four years to 1843 and found that 151 were in service, 43 were married, 5 dead and 1 insane. Nothing was known of 46 of the women but 43 had returned to prostitution. “Something has to be done;” said the article, “a certain number of feeble institutions creep on from year to year, offering scanty accommodation, languishing under the shade of narrow means or a burden of debt, unable for want of room or funds to carry out any efficient system of discipline or classification and conducted on most imperfect principles.”

This is the point at which the London Society for the Protection of Young Females, which had run an asylum in Tottenham since 1835, comes into the picture with the London Female Mission. On 31st March 1843 a meeting was called at the Exeter Hall in The Strand, the principal gathering place of Evangelicals, bringing together the committees of those societies throughout the metropolis who were addressing the question of prostitution. The Earl of Mountcashel, of an old Northern Irish Protestant family, was in the chair. Astbury was put on a committee for preparing a petition for parliament. They called themselves the Legislation Enactment Committee, subsequently changed to the less opaque London Society for the Protection of Women. This being the world of Evangelical voluntarism Astbury was also recruited for the committee of the Associate Institution, another organisation sharing the same objective. They lobbied parliament and secured meetings with Henry Brougham, but were unable to agree draft legislation which both met their aims and satisfied Brougham’s concerns about its operation and the politics of the House of Lords. Their chief support in parliament came from Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford. In the absence of any immediate relief through legislation the young women of the London streets would continue to rely on philanthropy to ameliorate their misery and it would continually fail to meet all their needs. After a few years’ work the Asylum in Camden Town closed for lack of support. Astbury had been the chief mover of it and he had given up on Camden Town in order to rent a house in Fulham. The
The voluntary approach had and has limitations that are sometimes overlooked. Astbury wanted to keep Benjamin Bond Cabell, a successful lawyer and Member of Parliament, off the committee of the Associate Institution because he was “not a pious man”. The battles for control between churchmen and dissenters also diverted energy from the chief objects. Then there was the problem that such work attracts sexual predators. Sending young girls into domestic service with a family might be to put them precisely where they would be abused. The London Female Mission sacked their matron for sending women to work for John Trenchard, vicar of Highworth in Wiltshire, because it was judged he was unsuitable. Astbury suspected that sometimes the full story of pregnant young women servants from supposedly respectable households was not being told. Was an asylum a genuine refuge, or a school for vice? Concentrating vulnerable young people in institutions has always had its down side for individuals.

In the course of this study we have followed the food chain of philanthropy, as it were, from the heart of the City where wealth is generated to the humble households who are the recipients of philanthropic endeavours. Our link has been a man who worked in the City and knew many of its leading men, but who also translated his concern for the poor into voluntary activity and mobilised his middle-class neighbours to assist. The same kind of activity was happening all over what was fast becoming a metropolitan area. James Sherman’s Surrey Chapel offered a range of philanthropic activities, some dating back to the ministry of Rowland Hill and others formed in the 1840s. The list included:

The Benevolent Society for the Relief of the Sick Poor
The Auxiliary to the London Missionary Society
Ten Sunday Schools and two Ragged Schools, in which 3,590 children were taught by 380 teachers
The Dorcas Society, for assisting poor mothers during their confinements
The Bible Association, for distributing scriptures
The Auxiliary to the Tract Society, circulating thousands of tracts and books
The Surrey Chapel Alms-houses for 23 poor women
The School of Industry for girls
The Female Clothing Society
The Christian Instruction Association
The Maternal Association
The Young Men’s Association
The Auxiliary to the London City Mission
The Christian Mutual Provident Society
The mission hall in the Waterloo Road
A class for educating Jewish children
The Cheshunt College Fund, for supporting the college where Sherman had trained.

Consider how many of these needs are now addressed from general taxation and the professional disciplines involved. Whatever the shortcomings of earlier philanthropy the sheer scope and ambition of the services provided must attract our admiration. Even where these needs are today addressed by voluntary organisations the funding is largely by public grants rather than private benefaction. Were the Christian merchants of the City more imaginative and generous in the early nineteenth century? Possibly not, but they did explore the limits of voluntarism before adopting that panacea of the twentieth century, “the government should do something about it.” Whatever means we adopt to counter social evils, they have to mobilise human
imagination and commitment to be effective. A spirit of altruism is critical. Such a spirit is not confined to religious people, indeed, some religious people seem conspicuously lacking in it, but there is a strong correlation. For charitable enterprises to flourish such altruism is essential. Whatever the failures in their methodology, the evidence is there to show that strong streak of altruism in the City in the 1830s and 40s, over and above the activities of the long-standing City charities. It was both generous and imaginative in response to new needs and we should celebrate it.

Revd Dr Stephen Orchard, Gresham College, 4 April 2005

1 Passages from the private and official life of the late Alderman Kelly, R.C. Fell, 1856 gives an account of Kelly’s life from which this summary is drawn.

2 ODNB

3 Subscribers who have been identified in addition to those mentioned are: Benjamin Richardson, Chemist; Mrs Catherine Leader and Miss Leader; Miss Barker; Mr Downey and Sarah Downey, who kept a school; John Collyer Knight, a Latin and Greek teacher, of the British Museum; Samuel Bellin; 1799-1893, the engraver; Clarkson Stanfield, RA; B. Allen of Brecknock Terrace, carpenter; Col Lindsay Baker; Professor William Morton, of the Royal Veterinary College; James Everingham, (Ind);

Mr and Mrs George Simpson, of independent means; Mr Gray, Gitten’s son-in-law, who was secretary after Woodman; Edward Carver, city speculator; Mrs Cooper, Camden Cottages; Mrs Millington, Haverstock Hill; Richard Thompson, grocer, 2 Park Terrace; James Nicholson, linen draper, Park Terrace; Mrs Mary Huxley, 10 Bayham Terrace, wife of a solicitor; Mrs Susannah Kerr, 3 Great Randolph Street; Mr Robert Atkinson of Sussex Cottages, merchant. Mr Wray Mornington Crescent (manufacturer’s agent)

4 Astbury 4/263

5 J Campbell’s Nasmith p331

6 The Ladies Committee: Mrs Pilkington, Mrs Clift, Hon Misses Waldegrave, Marchioness Cholmondley, Lady Hart.


7 Memoir of the Rev. James Sherman, Henry Allon, 1863, p333