

EPISCOPAL FLOATING CHURCH (1825-45)



In July 1825 a meeting was held at the London Tavern, Bishopsgate, presided over by the Lord Mayor, to consider the best means to promote the spiritual welfare of the seamen and their families. The London Episcopal Floating Church Society was created, and a chaplain was appointed, assisted by two sailors, to visit the seafarers afloat between London Bridge and the Pool, and their families on shore. A suitable boat was provided, and two seamen engaged to assist the chaplain. The Admiralty provided the ship *Brazen*, an ex sloop-of-war, as a 'floating church'; it was moored near the Tower at the Admiralty Pier, and boats were provided on Sundays from the Tower stairs for those attending services. The first service was held on Good Friday, 24 March 1825. A room was also hired at Wapping, for services and a Sunday School. King George IV became a patron, contributing £50 a year – a commitment continued by William IV and (for a time) Queen Victoria.

The first permanent chaplain (1829-32) was **James Hough**. Inspired by meeting Charles Simeon in 1815, he had worked as a missionary in India from 1816-22 and 1824-26, becoming Chaplain to the East India Company at Madras. On his return he published *Letters on the Climate, Inhabitants, Productions &c of the Neilgherries, or Blue Mountains of Coimbatore, South India* and, between 1839-45, a large four-volume *History of Christianity in India, from the Commencement of the Christian Era*. A fifth volume, published later, includes this biographical sketch. Constant exposure to the river undermined his health, and he moved to become Perpetual Curate of Ham. His successor **John Davis**, who had been curate of Chesterfield, also found conditions too strenuous, and turned instead to prison work,

becoming the Ordinary of Newgate. **Alphonsus Rose**, an active member of the Protestant Association, served for a time before moving to Canada, where he established churches in Owen Sound, Ontario.

Neville Jones was the next chaplain, before becoming the minister of St Mark Whitechapel. His successor (1839-42) at the Floating Church and Sailors' Home (but not, it seems, the Asylum) was **Sir William Dunbar**, the sixth baronet of a family based in Aberdeen. In his time, it was reported, few men attended the Floating Church. He resigned to become minister of St Paul's Chapel, Aberdeen, where he became part of the 'Drummondite' controversy. Like the Revd D.T.K. Drummond in Edinburgh, a fellow Church of England minister and Church Missionary Society secretary, he refused to use the Scottish liturgy, regarding it as too high church, and rejected the authority of the Bishop of Aberdeen. The bishop excommunicated him, and Dunbar sued for libel, winning £2000 damages [Scottish Court of Session, *Sir W. Dunbar v Right Rev. W. Skinner*, 1849]. This caused much comment in the church press. He then moved to parishes in Wales and Hampshire, where he died in 1881 – having in later years taken a keen interest in spiritualism, supporting the Langham Place lectures.

When Dunbar left the Floating Church, there were 31 applicants for the post, and it was agreed to give five of them a fortnight's trial! **Charles Adam John Smith**, curate of St Andrew Plymouth, was appointed (1842-47) - he later moved to Macclesfield. The Floating Church Society contributed £150 a year (despite being in debt), the Sailors' Home £100 and the Asylum £50.

As early as 1836 the Annual Report shows that Elliott was promoting, and finding patronage for, an alternative 'Episcopal Chapel on shore'. The *Brazen* was decaying, traffic on the river had increased, causing 'Sabbath desecration' and disturbing the services, and its mooring was under threat. With the construction of the docks, working patterns had changed: crews were no longer kept on board to unload cargoes, and lived on shore with their families, or in boarding houses, or at the Sailors' Home. In 1843 plans were laid to purchase the Danish Church, and a fund was set up - the Floating Church's debts had reduced, making a merger possible. But instead it was decided to build a new church, St Paul's Church for Seamen, which was consecrated in 1847. The final services on board the *Brazen* were in 1845, and it was broken up.
