

Navvy Mission Society

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The remains of a building on the far shore of Embsay reservoir are those of a redundant cotton store for the Whitfield Syke cotton mill. During the building of Embsay reservoir (1905-1909) this building was used as a Navvy Mission Society hall. So who, or rather what, was the Navvy Mission Society (NMS)?

It was founded by members of the Church of England in 1877, notably the Revd. Lewis M. Evans, rector of Leathley, near Otley, and Mrs Elizabeth Garnett, following their work among the navvies at Lindley reservoir near Otley. In some quarters, Elizabeth Garnett was regarded as the real founder of the NMS and, following her death in 1921, a memorial was erected in Ripon Cathedral in 1926 to honour her involvement with NMS.

The society was set up to cater for the spiritual, social and physical needs of the navvies, who were regarded as an isolated class by the nature of their work as they built reservoirs, canals and railways in places remote from towns and villages. Their itinerant lifestyle led to the belief that they were outcasts. During its founding the society did a survey, from which they estimated that there were about 40,000 navvies in Britain and if their wives and children were included, this figure rose to 50-60,000.

The aim of the society was to send specially qualified clergymen, scripture readers and later ex-navvies as missionaries to where they were needed - i.e. to sites where navvies were working - to establish day schools, Sunday Schools, lending libraries, Temperance associations, night schools, reading rooms, clothing clubs and savings banks, to bring within reach of the navvy the benefits enjoyed by other working men at that time. It became a very well run organisation. They were told when projects involving navvies were going to take place. They had a set format, so people knew what to expect when the Navvy Mission Society was involved, though some navvies liked the amenities on offer more than the religion that was preached!

The society also, through the publication of a 'Quarterly letter to men on public works' which was distributed to all navvies free of charge from 1879 until 1917, provided a means of communication, for them and their families all over Britain. An example was 'will Chris Lemon send to Mrs Cox 34, Chambers Street, Crewton, Derby 7/- which was lent to him from her children's money box during strike at Derby this year.' The letter also had subscribers, some of whom provided pensions to older retired navvies. In 1906 146 pensions were being provided. The Navvy Mission involvement in Embsay can be traced through the quarterly letter, as follows: The December 1905 issue stated that 'Embsay Beck reservoir Skipton tenders in for 21st August'.

By the June 1906 issue Embsay had a NMS missionary called J.R. King who lived at Rose Villas on Main Street. A Mission room and a Sunday service had been established. J.R. King stayed in the village until December 1906 when no longer

mentioned in the quarterly letter.

By June 1907 there was a new missionary called J. Langley, who lived at "Heather 18 Cottage in Embsay", but by September 1907 he had moved to Seathwaite Tarn in Broughton Fumess, and Embsay Reservoir was no longer mentioned under the reservoir list in the quarterly letter.

Accidents at the reservoir, though, were still being reported, e.g. "September 1908 issue Embsay; 'Scotch Bob' horse driver leg amputated below knee out of hospital doing well." Interestingly, no navy signed the NMS Temperance pledge or the anti gambling pledge in Embsay.

The Navy Mission Society did not have a big presence in Embsay compared to some places. In 1879, during the building of Barden Moor Reservoir, they set up two Sunday schools, two night schools, one day school, service on Sundays and a stand for a scripture reader. In 1906, at Angram Reservoir near Pateley Bridge, the society was responsible for establishing a hospital on the site and providing a resident doctor and nurse.

By the 1900s the society was influencing how navvies were treated world wide with missions in Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Tasmania and South Africa, to name but a few countries. After World War One social and technological change in Britain resulted in a significant decline in navy communities and in 1919 the Mission combined with the Christian Social Union to form the Industrial Christian Fellowship which is still very active today.

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