Mormons in Victorian Manchester

Jan G. Harris

Manchester Mormons were typical of many members of the Church who were baptized between 1838 and 1860, the early years of rapid growth in the British Mission. The Manchester Branch was one of the largest branches in England and was located in an industrial and urban setting, the kind of environment in which the majority of British converts lived.[1] A study of the members reveals many things about the rank and file English Mormon at that time. Through the demographic data extracted from branch records and personal information from journals, we can round out a picture of these people not only in terms of what work they did and where they lived, but also how they fit into the larger pattern.[2] By placing them in their historical setting, we may gain an understanding of some of the members' actions and attitudes during the Victorian era.

Mormons in Manchester were ordinary working-class people. They lived in working-class neighborhoods, and most of them, with the notable exception of William Clayton, the first branch president, worked with their hands. The only characteristic that set them apart from their working-class neighbors was their interest in religion. There was a consensus among observers of nineteenth-century Manchester that the working classes were indifferent to religion and generally did not attend public worship. Friedrich Engels claimed:

> The working man does not understand religious questions, and does not trouble himself about it. . . . All the writers of the bourgeois are unanimous on this point, that the workers are not religious and do not attend church.[3]

Leon Faucher, a French observer, wrote about his impressions of Manchester in 1844. He describes a typical Sunday morning with middle-class families "walking along in silence, and with a reserved and formal attitude toward church and chapels," while the members of the working class

> loiter on the thresholds of their cottages, or lounge in groups at the corners of the streets, until the hour of service is terminated, and the public houses are opened. Religion is presented to them in such a sombre and gloomy aspect; it succeeds so well in addressing neither the senses or imagination, nor the heart that it remains the exclusive patrimony of the rich.[4]

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John Kent writes that while a majority of the urban working classes professed a belief in God, they limited their outward religious observances to religious holidays such as christenings, marriages, and burials.[5]

The Mormon converts were different. In contrast to the majority of the working class, many had been active members of other religious sects before they joined the LDS church. Even the converts who did not belong to other religious organizations prior to their conversions often described themselves as "seekers" because they were disillusioned with organized religion and were seeking Christ's church. Of the twenty-one Manchester Branch members known to have written journals, nine wrote of their dissatisfaction with organized religion before their conversion to Mormonism. Their feelings follow the same pattern of religious behavior that Malcolm Thorp describes in his study of the religious background of British LDS converts. Thorp reports that converts came from a variety of religious backgrounds and that the churches they had attended were composed of predominantly middle- and upper-class congregations.

Manchester Mormons, like the Mormons in Thorp's study, felt that the major reason for their baptism into the LDS church was the concept of the restoration of biblical truth included in the theology of Mormonism. The experience of James Burgess was typical of many converts' search for truth:

> I got a little astray in the world for a short time and thence I begin to think about my soul and first to one chapel and then to another but I did not think that any of them was the Church of God. Then I joined this Church and began to serve the Lord. I was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the nineteenth of October, 1840.[6]

After their conversion, Mormons tended to be more active with their religion than members of other denominations. Horace Mann wrote:

> Within a short period since the introduction of this singular creed, as many as 222 chapels or stations have been established with accommodations for 30,783 worshippers or hearers. The activity of the disciples of this faith is evidenced by the frequency with which they occupy these meeting places. Out of a total of 222 places as many as 147 (or 66 percent) were open in the morning, 187 (84 percent) were open in the afternoon, and 193 (or 87 percent) in the evening. Comparison with similar statistics of the other churches will show that this is much above the average frequency of services.[7]

In addition to church attendance, Mormons devoted much of their time to missionary work. Even though most English elders were not officially full-time missionaries, they were very active in preaching the gospel and were responsible for the major part of the growth of the Church in England. For example, John Druce had been a member of the Church for only ten weeks when he was called to be a local missionary.

He reported that he baptized his first convert one month later. After being a member for a year, he was appointed to preside over the branches in Middleton and Blakely. He also served as president of the Salford, Pendleton, and Cross Moor branches.[8]

Except for their religious attitudes and activities, Manchester Mormons were typical inhabitants of the city. They were fairly young, most being baptized in their twenties or early thirties. There were more women than men, and many were single. Nevertheless, a substantial number were married and had families.[9] The age and sex of the Mormons reflected the general population trends of industrialized cities in England during the early Victorian era.[10] Branch records reveal that most of the Mormons, like a majority of the inhabitants of Manchester, immigrated from other areas of England. According to the 1851 census, about one-fourth of the population were natives of the city. For Mormons, the proportion of Manchester natives was about one-third. The immigrants primarily came from nearby industrial and rural areas of Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire.[11]

The primary reason for migration to Manchester was economic. Manchester was the most extensive manufacturing town in England. People were attracted to it because of opportunities for employment. For example, William Barton, a branch member, had lived in Carlisle where his father was a printer. The business failed, so the family moved to Manchester. They lived in the city for one year and then moved to Sunnyside, just a few miles distant. After about eight months, they moved back to Manchester where the children could get jobs.[12] This kind of short-term migration was typical of the period.[13] Since the hometowns of most members were not far away, it was possible for them to visit relatives and spread the gospel after they had joined the Church.

The vast majority of members were manual laborers. Within the branch, workers were distinguished by the security of their jobs. The skilled artisans had good educations by Victorian standards and were relatively steadily employed and earned good wages. Unskilled laborers suffered from sporadic unemployment and low wages. However, even the better-off faced hardships in living in a rapidly growing industrial city.[14] Manchester was the first city in England to undergo the rapid transformation of industrialization. Working-class housing was built close to the factories so the workers could walk to work, as there was no cheap public transportation. As a result of the proximity to the factories, the air was smoky, and the dwellings were inundated by soot. In addition, houses were built quickly and were of poor quality, public sanitation was almost nonexistent, and living conditions were crowded.[15]

Although most of the members were manual laborers, living conditions and financial situations varied substantially. For example, Edward Robinson considered himself to be fairly well-off. He was

trained as a footman for the gentry. His responsibilities included driving the coach and caring for the horses. He was twenty-one when he married Mary Smith, a tutor for his employer's family. The Robinsons' position improved when Edward was promoted in 1837 to be the conductor of the "Rocket," the first train to run in Manchester. Edward's son described their home as comfortable because his father made "a good salary and had a thrifty wife." Mary joined the Church in 1839, and Edward was baptized a year later. The family emigrated in 1842. The decision to go to the United States was difficult because Edward was reluctant to leave his job.[16]

The Richard Daniels Brown family lived under very different conditions. The Browns were originally from Wigan, Lancashire, just a few miles from Manchester. In Wigan, Richard was a dresser and weaver, and he and his wife Margaret had seven children. Later he lost his job because of failing eyesight and moved to Manchester to work in a cotton mill. It was there that he heard about the Church and was baptized. At that time he earned only twelve shillings a week. He felt fortunate to get any job because work was scarce at the time. However, he couldn't support the entire family, so the children began to work in the factories. Even this was not enough, and the family suffered intensely from lack of food. In December 1849, just five months after Richard was baptized, the family went to the workhouse for help. Eventually they were able to subsist without public aid, but finances were always strained.[17]

In the case of the Browns, and many working-class families like them, the cycle of poverty followed a predictable pattern. As a young single man, Richard Brown was able to earn plenty of money to meet his needs. When he was first married, his wife also worked. Their combined income was sufficient for a comfortable life. As children were born, Margaret could no longer work, and the family lived at a subsistence level until the children became young adult wage earners and helped ease the financial burden.[18] The Brown family continued to struggle in England until 1864 when Richard and Margaret sailed for America. Their son Thomas had preceded his parents and sent money for the rest of the family to emigrate.[19]

The examples of the Browns and Robinsons show the diverse economic circumstances of the Manchester Mormons. During the early years of the mission, the Church did not have a formal welfare organization, and all aid for the needy came from sympathetic family, friends, and members of the branch. Members helped each other when they could, but many of them were already living at a subsistence level and had no money to spare. Financial aid was usually short-term because the majority of members did not have the resources to give substantial assistance. And even these limited efforts at relieving economic distress

sometimes ran into difficulties, as is evident in the case of Sarah Duckworth. At the 17 January 1840 council meeting, a decision was made that she should go to Brother Jackson's for two weeks and that money should be collected to help Joseph Millwood during his illness.[20] Unfortunately, Sarah did not get along with Brother Jackson's wife, and she had to leave. Later the branch took a subscription for her. The last journal entry William Clayton made about Sarah reveals some of the problems the branch had in giving members long-term assistance. He wrote:

> Sarah should have lived at Brother Jacksons 2 weeks but his wife was not willing. Sarah had been at the Bewshers five days—but Bewsher's could not do with. I had talked with Sister Bewsher about Sarah had no where to go— no bed to sleep on and something must be done immediately. The subscription was to purchase a bed and she might have Mary Ann Johnsons room and the church pay the whole rent of house.[21]

Ultimately, the Church could not support her, and she spent the last part of her life in a workhouse where she died in 1852.[22]

In some cases, the branch was unable to give any aid. The 1844 Manchester Branch Historical Record preserves a pathetic plea from a member for help due to "extreme poverty." He was told by the leadership that the Church could not help because of the "extreme poverty" of the branch. However, in response to a report that some Saints were perishing from lack of food, the branch council later that year passed a resolution to have a collection on Sunday for the needy.[23]

There were many other instances when branch members acted as a community by helping each other in a variety of ways. They tried to take care of each other when there was sickness. Entries such as these are common in William Clayton's journal:

> Went to see Brother Burgess child. Very sick. Not likely to recover. . . . Brother Green rather sick. Alice Hardman sick. . . . Been to see Paul Harris— sick. . . . Went to see Brother Burgess. Very sick . . . was called this A.M. at 3 o'clock to Sister Dea. I found her very ill—insensible. Prayed with her and she appeared better.[24]

These Mormons had some unique emotional challenges that strengthened their sense of comradeship. Although most members had at least one other family member living within the branch, nearly one-third had no family members who joined the Church. Even when there were family members who joined the Church, it often took several years to achieve a harmony of beliefs. Baptismal dates show that there were several years between the baptismal dates of spouses, children, brothers, and sisters.[25] As a result, many members had to deal with negative pressure about religion from family, friends, and employers. This caused the members to rely on one another for spiritual and emotional support.

Difficulties associated with joining the Church when there was family disapproval were noted in several journals. Charles Miller, a branch member and later branch president, wrote about the problems he had with his wife, Jane, when he joined the Church. He recounts the time when he left his job to become a full-time missionary:

> [I heard] my wife crying because I had Left my employment where I had worked fifteen years for Mathew Gibbons. . . . I told her God would provide and left home rejoicing in my God and at the Close of the week returned with means for her and for to buy a book that was important to me.[26]

This would have been a trial to any wife's faith, but at that time Jane was not even a member of the Church. Eventually she was baptized, but there was a conflict about the importance of Church service before she joined. In at least one family the conflict was never resolved. John Needham, a branch member, noted in his journal, "Sister Poole's husband was there in the church, but since been cut off. She suffered much persecution from him and has since left him."[27]

Not only did membership in the Church sometimes bring family conflict, it could also put one's employment at risk. James Jepson, a worker in a cotton mill, was fired when his employer found out that he had joined the Church. A few weeks later his former employer passed Jepson on the street and asked him if he still planned to go to Utah. Jepson said "yes." The employer told him that he had fired him to discourage him from going, but if he was still planning to go he could have his job back until he left.[28]

Because of the opposition many members felt from people who did not agree with their beliefs, they derived comfort from their friendships with fellow Latter-day Saints and enjoyed frequent meetings and social gatherings. Although the size of the branch grew from 160 in 1840 to 730 in 1851, members frequently met in small groups rather than one large congregation. This gave them the opportunity to strengthen one another. The branch was divided into small districts that met in different locations throughout the city.[29] These groups met on Sundays and also on other days of the week, not only for religious instruction but also for self-improvement. According to John Druce, the Poland Street room was open on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings for reading, writing, and arithmetic.[30] James Newton, who was first counselor to James Walker, wrote about his duties in relationship to the districts: "i had to visit them as often as i could so that i was at some meeting every night in the week. . . . i preached the gospel many times publick in Manchester streets, also rooms and Halls."[31]

Despite the practice of members meeting in small groups, missionaries tended to prefer large audiences when they introduced the gospel. When the American missionaries first came to Manchester, they

attempted to get permission to be guest speakers at established churches. When they were unable to get invitations, they held small meetings in obscure places. Their first meeting was in a shop cellar at Paul Harris's shoemaking establishment. Although this was not a prestigious place to hold a meeting, their efforts were fruitful. At least one person was moved by what he heard. Paul Harris, the host, joined the Church.[32] There must have been many other similar meetings in homes and small rooms. However, the missionaries concentrated their efforts in procuring places where they could reach the largest numbers of people at one time. The Mormons leased Carpenter's Hall for large missionary meetings and conferences. These meetings were advertised on handbills and by word of mouth and were attended by both members and nonmembers. Carpenter's Hall was an ideal place to meet because it had a seating capacity of two thousand people at a cost of two pounds per meeting.[33] According to John Needham, "it was a large commodious place with a gallery at each end."[34]

Church meetings were more than sermons; they also provided opportunities for members to visit each other and to get acquainted with the Apostles and other prominent missionaries from America. John Needham wrote about an excursion he took with the Apostles during one conference:

> I went to the zoological gardens with Elders Brigham Young, Smith, Kimball, Richards, Pratt, Turley and Clayton. We enjoyed ourselves very much. The monkeys were playful and would take anything out of our hands without seeming afraid. The brethren seemed to rejoice together, as it was some time since so many of the Quorum met together to enjoy one another's company.[35]

On another occasion Needham describes a party at the Hardman home:

> I went to Mother Hardman's where several brethren and sisters had met to join in a feast of pancakes. The serving was quite new to me and Brother Clift. We had to turn our own cakes, but unfortunately some went on the floor. We had plenty of [illegible] to wipe our mouth and give us water. We sang a hymn and the seventies, Brother Clift, and myself went to Brother Beaches again.[36]

Another characteristic that set the Mormons apart was the absence of a paid clergy. This was much different from other denominations where leadership came primarily from the middle and upper classes. As a result, Mormonism gave many members leadership opportunities that they would not have had as members of other denominations. For example, Charles Miller, a shoemaker, was the Manchester Branch president in 1843, and John Druce, an engraver, served as president in 1844. Both of these men were manual laborers and would not have had

the opportunity to hold important leadership positions in middle-class churches.[37]

Emigration was another factor that influenced the converts and the branch. Although emigration was not a primary motivating factor for baptism, it certainly had a profound effect on converts' personal lives and on the Church as a whole because it was the most visible reason why membership in England decreased. During the first two years of the mission, the leadership in Britain tried to dissuade members from emigrating to the United States. This was probably due to the fact that during this time period the Saints had been driven from Missouri and were just beginning to establish themselves in Illinois. It was not until 1841 that the brethren counseled the converts to prepare to emigrate to Zion.[38]

Emigration was encouraged by the Church leadership in editorials printed in the *Millennial Star* and sermons preached at branch and conference meetings. The philosophy guiding Church leaders was the belief that the kingdom of God was not reserved for heaven. It was an earthly institution that was to be established by the Saints. In an epistle from Nauvoo dated 28 August 1841, the Twelve Apostles instructed English converts:

> All Saints who desire to do the will of heaven, . . . come . . . to the places of gathering as speedily as possible, for the time is rapidly approaching when the Saints will have occasion to regret that they have so long neglected to assemble themselves together and stand in holy places, awaiting those tremendous events which are so rapidly approaching the nations of the earth. . . . We recommend to the brethren in England to emigrate in the fall or winter.[39]

Because of the belief that emigration was the "will of heaven," "gathering" became one of the major tools for the establishment of Zion. Two factors illustrate the importance and magnitude of migration. The first is that 50 percent of the members who were baptized by 1840 and did not eventually emigrate to Zion were excommunicated from the Church.[40] The reasons why these members decided not to emigrate are not recorded. However, "gathering" was clearly an outward sign of faithfulness to the Church. The second evidence of the magnitude of the migration is that by 1860 almost half the population of Utah was British.[41] Since the Manchester Mormons were representative of the many members in England, these statistics illustrate that it was the ordinary people, from Manchester and elsewhere, who were doing the extraordinary work of building Zion.

NOTES

[1]See P. A. M. Taylor, *Expectations Westward* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965); and Malcolm R. Thorp, "The Religious Background of the Mormon Converts in Great Britain, 1837–52," *Journal of Mormon History* 4 (1977): 51–66.

[2]Branch Records were the primary source for statistical data, including names, baptismal dates, addresses, priesthood office, excommunications, emigrations to Utah and other parts of England, and deaths. Approximately 2,100 different names were listed. See Manchester Branch, "Record of the Members," pt. 3, Family History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Manchester Branch Records).

[3]Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 71.

[4]Leon Faucher, *Manchester in 1844: Its Present Condition and Future Prospects* (London: Simpkin Marshall and Co., 1844), 53–54.

[5]John Kent, "Feelings and Festivals: An Interpretation of Some Working Class Religious Attitudes," in *The Victorian City: Images and Reality,* ed. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 2:855–71.

[6]James Burgess, Diaries, 2, Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (herafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

[7]Horace Mann, "Report and Tables on England and Wales Population," introduction to vol. 10 of Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), 156.

[8]John Druce, Journal, 64, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo (hereafter cited as Harold B. Lee Library).

[9]Manchester Branch Records.

[10]Alan Rogers, *Approaches to Local History* (London: Longman Grout, 1977), 31–33.

[11]Manchester Branch Records; Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 33.

[12]William Barton, Diary, LDS Church Archives.

[13]Anderson, *Family Structure*, 33.

[14]Unfortunately, Manchester branch records do not reveal the occupation of members. However, some members did mention their jobs and the jobs of other members in their journals and letters. From these records, seventeen different occupations were identified. See Jan Harris, "Mormons in Victorian Manchester" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1987), 160–74.

[15]See, for example, Engels, *Condition of the Working Class;* François Vigier, *Change and Apathy: Liverpool and Manchester during the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970); and John D. Writh and Robert L. Jones, *Manchester and São Paulo: Problems of Rapid Urban Growth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), 140.

[16]Myrtle Robinson Senstrand, "Biography of Edward Robinson (Pioneer)," in *History of Utah Pioneers of Adams Camp*, typescript, 2–5, Harold B. Lee Library.

[17]Vance M. Holland, comp., *Thomas Daniels Brown and Esther Wardle* (Salt Lake City: Brown Family Organization, 1962), 44–46.

[18]Anderson, *Family Structure*, 36.

[19]Holland, *Thomas Daniels Brown*, 46.

[20]James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander, eds., *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton, 1840–1842* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Press, 1974), 70.

[21]Ibid., 88.

[22]Ibid., 225.

[23]"Manchester Branch Historical Record," 8 March and 24 May 1844, LDS Church Archives.

[24]Allen and Alexander, *Manchester Mormons,* 56, 93, 94, 113.

[25] Manchester Branch Records.

[26]Charles D. Miller, Diary, 9, Harold B. Lee Library.

[27]John Needham, Autobiography, 38, LDS Church Archives.

[28]James Jepson, Jr., Memoirs, 5, Harold B. Lee Library.

[29]Allen and Alexander, *Manchester Mormons,* 67.

[30]John Druce, Journal, 28, Harold B. Lee Library.

[31]James Lee Newton, Journal, 11, LDS Church Archives.

[32]Richard Steele, Journal, 6, LDS Church Archives; and Needham, Autobiography, 3.

[33]Joseph Smith, Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (1946–50; reprint, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 4:214; 5:418 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

[34]Needham, Autobiography, 13.

[35]Ibid., 35.

[36]Ibid., 20.

[37]For further information on these people see Harris, "Mormons in Victorian Manchester," 166, 170.

[38]Allen and Alexander, *Manchester Mormons,* 92.

[39]*History of the Church* 4:410.

[40]Allen and Alexander, *Manchester Mormons,* 22.

[41]The 45 percent figure was arrived at by comparing the number of British members who immigrated to the United States between 1840 and 1859 with the number of people living in Utah in 1860. The number of emigrants was taken from Richard L. Evans, *A Century of Mormonism in Great Britain,* 245. The population of Utah was recorded by the United States Bureau of the Census and reprinted in Richard D. Poll, ed., *Utah's History* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 688.

These figures do not include the unrecorded number of members who left Britain individually or in small groups. In addition, they do not reveal the number of emigrants who died on the trip or after arrival, those who left the Church in the widespread disaffection at Nauvoo, and those who left England before 1859 but did not arrive in Utah until after 1860.

Although these statistics are obviously incomplete, they are still significant because they show that in just numbers alone, the British converts had a great impact on the growth of the Church.