

The Revd William Grimshaw of Haworth (1708 – 1763)

The Revd William Grimshaw, incumbent at Haworth Parish Church, Yorkshire, from 1742 to his death in 1763, was a remarkable character and a leading figure in the evangelical revival of the 18th century. However, his life and ministry tend to be overshadowed by the Brontë family whose father, Patrick, was incumbent there in the next century. Grimshaw was educated in Blackburn before going to Cambridge University as a sizar, as did Patrick Brontë from his school in Northern Ireland. Sizar were given their education and kept free at the university in return for duties as servants to wealthy students. When they graduated, sizar were ordained into the Church of England and placed in outlying poor parishes. Haworth was one such parish where the incumbent had to rely on tithes to supplement his meagre stipend.

However, both Grimshaw and Brontë were installed as 'permanent curates' at Haworth just when the Industrial Revolution was gaining momentum in the area, and investing what little capital they had in the thriving local industries, they became relatively wealthy men. Both were philanthropists and gave money to charity. Grimshaw built the Methodists their church at West Lane in 1758, as he was very friendly with the Wesley brothers and shared many of their doctrines.

Ordained in 1731, Grimshaw spent some years in Todmorden, over the hill from Haworth in Lancashire. Like many clergymen of the day (see Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) he indulged himself in very earthly pursuits: card-playing with the local gentry, fox-hunting and shooting, among others. But shortly before moving to Haworth, his young wife's death, and his ministry to one of his parishioners suffering from post-natal depression, as well as a mystical experience, brought about a profound spiritual change and Grimshaw became an ardent evangelical. When he went to Haworth, there were barely a dozen regular communicants each Sunday. Within a year of his appointment there were at times nearly a thousand – when thirty five bottles of communion wine were consumed!

During his stay at Haworth, Grimshaw didn't live at the Parsonage (now the Brontë Society Museum) That was built some twenty years after his death. Grimshaw lived at Sowden's Farm, about ten minutes' walk from the church. There he was visited by leading evangelicals of the day like the Wesley brothers and John Newton. Grimshaw linked early Methodism with the evangelical wing of the established church. In 1758 he built the Methodist chapel at Haworth in West Lane 'to maintain gospel preaching' should he not be succeeded by an evangelical incumbent. However, towards the end of his life he was unhappy with the drift of Methodism away from the established church and the registration of Methodist preaching-houses as separate dissenting bodies under the Toleration Act of Parliament.

Grimshaw was a very powerful preacher and moralist. It was said his parishioners were more afraid of him than the local magistrate. After his spiritual conversion, he firmly opposed horse-racing, gambling, card-playing, hunting and rigorously imposed Sabbath observance. Sometimes, during the singing of long psalms during the service he'd wander down to the Black Horse public house near the church with his horse-whip, where, it was said, if those drinking inside saw him approaching, they'd leap from the windows and hide behind a wall till he'd gone. And on one occasion he was so angry with the response to his preaching that he put a donkey in the pulpit telling the congregation that that was all they were fit to have as their preacher.

Yet, if extreme in his beliefs by today's standards, Grimshaw was a very good pastor, regularly visiting the housebound, elderly and sick and overseeing the education of the young. He mixed authority with humour, bluntness with tenderness, condemnation with compassion, and his congregation grew so large during his tenure that the church had to be enlarged. In his sermons he often used broad dialect and would pause when giving communion to bless communicants who needed blessing.

Strong and healthy he drove himself hard, preaching in alternate weeks on two circuits. In 1749 he published 'An Answer to a Sermon Lately Published Against the Methodists' by the Rev. Mr George White, a local Anglican incumbent who organised resistance against the Methodists. He also wrote several devotional and autobiographical texts.

Dying at the age of fifty five, he'd out-lived two wives, contracting typhus after visiting a parishioner suffering from the disease, then rampant in Haworth.

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