Chapter 4

The Church and School Hall

Whilst the evidence so far quite justly indicates the importance of the public house in the providing and development of recreation within Aston Manor it should not be thought they stood alone. For there were two other locations, apart from the commercially directed Aston Lower Grounds site that was able to provide a substantial portion of what was available, the church and school. However it has to be said that what was presented and no doubt greatly enjoyed within the walls of these establishments was as often as not considered ‘respectable’. Of course, in regards to the latter, not only did they contribute to what many considered ‘reputable and upright recreational opportunities’ but also, as will be explained later to the advance of adolescent recreational activity, within the arena of sporting endeavour.

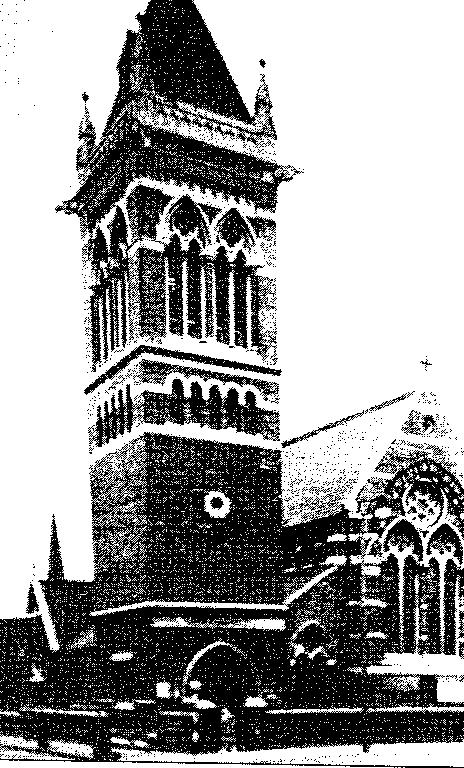
The involvement of the religious community in recreational life should not be however considered as a phenomenon of the mid-19th century but one that had its roots sown from the time of the establishment of the church itself. However, it could be argued that its increased contribution during our period owed itself fundamentally to a response to industrialisation and the emergence of the large, urban location, with its transient population.[[1]](#footnote-1) This, of course might be open to debate but what is certainly not is that individuals such as von Raumer could note, as early as 1841 that in regards to the advance of the ‘respectable’:

“Laudable efforts have been made to open institutions for workmen, citizens, mechanics and the lower classes in general, where they may receive instruction adapted to their condition, instead of squandering the time, when they are not at work, in mere indolence, or in sinful indulgences. Lectures and books, calculated to awaken their mental faculties, and to have a salutary influence on their ordinary occupations, were therefore provided. By this means, the influence of false teachers and false doctrines was to be combated, and the great danger to civil society, which has been so often mentioned, would be at the least diminished.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Certainly in regards to Aston Manor from 1870 until 1911 the religious community was clearly actively involved in presenting the idiom of ‘improving recreation’ to the local population. Perhaps the overriding reason for this can be seen to have originated in 1851. It was in this year that the Mann Census was taken, an act which, to the ‘amazement and horror’ of the respectable middle classes indicated that religion, or at least the attending of religious assembly appeared to have been fundamentally rejected by much of the ‘working class’ of the nation. It could therefore be argued that the church, in all its various hues found itself in need of a response, one that took the form of, among others of involving itself in the everyday pursuits of their flocks. The church was no longer able to sit apart from its congregations, but had to become evangelical. Though the Non-Conformist and Catholic church was already, to a greater or lesser extent already imbibed with this notion the Established Church, The Church of England had fundamentally developed a character that did not reflect such an action or belief. It had adopted a position within which, as the church of the nation it seemingly expected allegiance. However the shock of the Mann Census provoked in many of its clergy and those incumbents of other denominations a reassessment of the church’s position and a desire to realign itself with the people. By adopting such a position, particularly within the urban environment the church, in all its hues had, by 1870 seemingly proceeded upon a path that would have an immense effect upon the nature, range and context of recreation.

The result was that by 1870, in regards to Aston Manor most of the religious establishments had become actively involved in the presentation of recreational opportunity and, as such offered an alternative to the ‘demon’ inn or tavern. However, what was offered, if the pages of the local newspapers are to be taken as a guide was somewhat restricted. What was principally presented was music, lectures and a limited educational provision and, as will be discussed in a later chapter the organisation of sport. In presenting a somewhat constrained repertoire the religious community allied to the local schools nevertheless approached their task with enthusiasm and vigour.

St Mary‘s*,* for example which was opened for worship in December 1863 not only provided musical entertainment that could be potentially enjoyed by all but also one which allowed it to provide a platform for imparting the desired Christian values.



St. Mary’s

There are too many instances to list comprehensively but, perhaps typical of the attractions that were provided was when, in 1875 the church assisted in the formation of Choral Classes, at no cost to the participants, the church being the meeting place[[3]](#footnote-3) and, from November of the same year lectures and practical lessons of reading and reciting.[[4]](#footnote-4) Presumably based upon the success of this initiative the church, in its hall, in the November of 1879 commenced a series of ‘Winter Sessions,’ which not only provided discussion but also tea and entertainment, a feature of the churches recreational life which ran until at least the turn of the century.

The venue, like many others also actively sought to incorporate local organisations in its aims and, perhaps typical of the events held, in conjunction with one such society, the Mutual Improvement Society was one enacted on Tuesday, 19th October 1876. Here, the proceedings were opened by The Rev. F. Smith. The ‘Bill of Fare’ contained amongst other items a Mr. Alfred Hill delivering a lecture on Vaccination, a Mr. Swingler, in good voice rendering ‘Tis but a Little Faded Flower’ with ‘considerable effect’ whilst a Mr. Blanche brought the house down with a rendition of ‘The Man of War.’ The evening was concluded by readings by, presumably church members Messrs Collins, Haywood and Talbot.[[5]](#footnote-5) At another lecture meeting held in the following year the topic chosen was particularly apt, being ‘Leisure Hours,’ a vindication of the point made previously of the concern of the respectable for those not considered so.

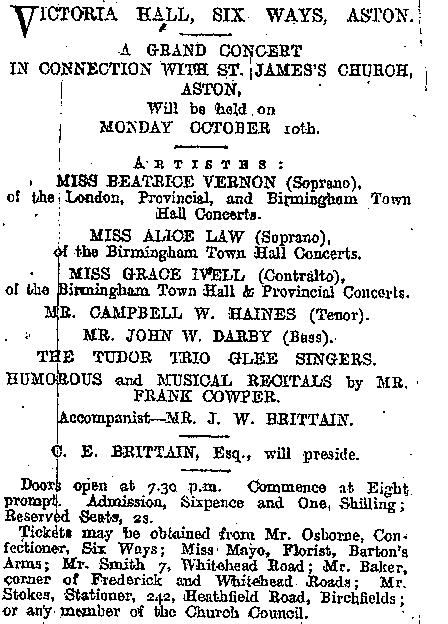
Amongst the other various events that this establishment presented included: elementary singing classes and, at the school that was associated with this church, from the 1870s concerts which were intermittently presented by its choral society. One of the earliest, of a selection from the ‘Messiah’, charged an entrance fee of 1/-, children under 12 years of age, 6d.[[6]](#footnote-6) There is no indication as to the length of time that the choral classes were held but it appears that certainly up to the late 1880s the church presented musical events incorporating the choral society. Via this evangelical approach St. Mary’s continued to reach out to the community and in a movement towards expanding its links it organised and established an Institute which provided what might be described as a ‘club’ for members of the congregation, allowing for social evenings to be presented, an alternative, it must be presumed for the attractions of the public house.[[7]](#footnote-7)

One of its earliest functions was one delivered by a Mr. Roddis, a locally well known sculptor on ‘A Thousand Years of Dress and Fashion’. The presenter, in this lecture went through the ages, explaining armour, Court dress and the Puritan style.[[8]](#footnote-8) Additionally, as reported by The Aston News the church also regularly arranged excursions for its members. On one occasion, in 1886 they travelled to Bewdley to visit Ribbesford Church, whilst in the 1891 they went to Cubbington Hall in Warwickshire, and after enjoying various activities including tennis, bowls, quoits and football they had refreshments. Finally, as a grand finale a cricket match was organised between the married and single men, the latter emerging triumphant. Significantly there is no mention of the female in the report! The following year again it is recorded that, in this case the choir enjoyed in September of 1892 a trip to Leamington Spa.[[9]](#footnote-9) It can be presumed, if the local press can be taken as a guide the concerts, lecture presentations and excursion provided by this particular religious establishment appear to have remained popular right up to the later years of the century and beyond.[[10]](#footnote-10) In 1909, for example a Lydia Inshaw presented a series of concerts, in the school room that was associated with the location, which drew, it was said reasonable audiences.[[11]](#footnote-11)

St Mary‘swas, of course not the only location that provided opportunities. After its establishment in 1875, The Aston Choral Society,[[12]](#footnote-12) (not to be confused with the choral organisation already mentioned) commenced public performances in the hall of the Board School, Aston Road, with a rendition of, again, Handle’s ‘Messiah’, a performance which it repeated at Christmas.[[13]](#footnote-13) Comprising, it must be presumed of local men this was the first of many which the society enacted, not only in the Manor but also in surrounding areas, (see Chapter 8 for more on this society). In 1892 for example in what must have been a highly ambitious production it performed ‘The May Queen’ and Hyden’s ‘Creation’ at the Lozells Road Board School. That this was noted as being a rehearsal for the coming season appears to indicate that the society was intent on continuing the presentation of high quality musical entertainment.[[14]](#footnote-14) Indeed proof of such can be gleaned from the local press reporting on the society presenting, for the fourth time a concert of their work in 1892[[15]](#footnote-15) and in 1894 of ‘Judas Maccabeous, both at The Victoria Hall.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Sadly though, it would appear that their efforts were not matched by the numbers that were attracted to see them perform. Indeed a year later, in 1895, another presentation at The Victoria Hall provided further evidence of what appears to have been a struggle to survive in the face of what appears to be public apathy. For, as the press reported their efforts appear to have been in vain: “despite the quality of the Bill, the audience was poor.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Given that after this performance no further reports of the society’s activities appeared in the local press it could well be supposed that the society may well have ceased to perform. However, in regards to the Lozells site it would seem that it remained a popular venue. It is recorded that as late as 1905 it was the scene of a recital by the Lichfield Cathedral Quartet of ‘The Long Day Closes’, though after this date nothing more is mentioned in the local press.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

Nevertheless the apparent demise of this particular recreational body should not be seen as an indicator of a general decline in the interest in music or indeed events provided by the church in general. Many musical entertainments retained popularity. St. James Church and locations associated with it, particularly ‘The Mission’, from 1895 held both concerts and lectures. Typical of such presentations that were enacted towards the end of the century was one of a light operatic nature that was supplemented by a lecture on ’Llangolen.’ However, perhaps untypical and rather astonishingly it was reported that this event drew, according to a press report an attendance of some four hundred persons, with ‘many being turned away.’[[19]](#footnote-19) There is, of course, no way of knowing if this attendance was typical but, if it was then it must be concluded that this location was extremely popular!! What is known however is, that right up to 1911 this church provided a multitude of very similar events.

This particular religious establishment, like so many others also at times utilised the ever increasingly popular Victoria Hall for larger functions. Certainly from around 1900 onwards this location was connected with several quite extensive concerts. All, it seemed followed a similar pattern in that guest performers from local musical societies were engaged, supplemented by local acts, such a presentation that was made in 1887 when a Ballad concert featuring a Ms Lizzie Neal was held.[[20]](#footnote-20) The venue appears to have been a popular location for this sort of light entertainment, as in 1904 when a programme was provided that presented the following Bill:



This clearly shows that the format was clearly based around what might be considered the ‘taste of the respectable’ and in no way reflected any popularist inclination.[[21]](#footnote-21) Additionally the venue was the scene for such events as costume dances[[22]](#footnote-22) and ‘various soirees’ right up to 1911. It was, in reality a venue for, it was hoped the more discerning.

Other locations can also be identified as contributing to this ‘respectable’ recreational provision, St Stephens Church and School on many occasions organising concerts and lectures on a myriad of subjects, one, for example being held at the Wheelers Street Chapel on the subject of ‘The Land of The Harp.’[[23]](#footnote-23) In regards to concerts however perhaps their most ambitious presentation was, when in 1898 it sought to aid the Cassack and Organ Fund. Performing, it can be only be presumed within the actual church a choir of eighty performers sang, to an overflowing audience, again Handel’s Messiah.[[24]](#footnote-24) Another venue which was particularly active was, from the 1880sThe Albert Road School[[25]](#footnote-25)which presented concerts which provided for well attended audiences. This location, for example is also recorded as putting on children’s entertainment and parishioners presentations as early as 1875.[[26]](#footnote-26) Indeed some seven years later this location was the venue for a charitable drive in aid of destitute children of the area, presenting as it did several concerts[[27]](#footnote-27) and was still presenting musical attractions as late as 1892.[[28]](#footnote-28) It should not be thought however that venues such as this, or indeed others of the same ilk were not susceptible to trends in popularity. The fame of the Banjo, for example, both locally and nationally was reflected, in the case of the Manor by the fact that in 1896 the Orpheus Banjo Band made an appearance, one of many within in the area.[[29]](#footnote-29) Additionally The Aston Church School in Alfred Street also, on many occasions presented, for the younger members of the area musical entertainment for which an entrance fee of 1/- front seats, 6d back seats charge was made, surprisingly high it might be imagined for the type of audience it was hoping to attract![[30]](#footnote-30) This high level of admission could, of course have been a deliberate ploy so as to restrict the type of audience to what the organisers considered to be acceptable. Whatever the reason it would certainly seem that this was a deliberate policy for the following year similar miscellaneous concerts were presented, all of which perhaps reflected, via relatively high entrance fees the same social ambitions.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The Aston Institute, Park Lane, (the Old Temperance Hall) was also a location which was sometimes used in the period of the mid 1870s onwards and made available many attractions including lectures on literature, one proposing on one occasion that:

“one of the principle indicators of the prosperity and happiness of a civilised community, especially a prosperous one like that of Aston Manor is the literary learning of men and women.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

These, provided normally at no cost to the participants, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Friday and Saturdays, were on such diverse subjects as science, art, maths and writing and appear to perhaps indicate that the notion of ‘improving recreation’ had, even at the early year of 1876 been recognised and implemented within Aston Manor.[[33]](#footnote-33) The nature and content of what was often presented, in regards to the female also substantiates the point made earlier in regards to her perceived social position. In providing instruction for the female the ‘Ladies Useful Work Association’ formed in 1877, in Birmingham established as its agenda the promoting of:

“habits of thrift and the improvement of domestic life among mothers of families and young people commencing married life.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Commencing in October, with cookery lessons they provided lectures and lessons on all aspects of the home, educating the lady of the house in how to perform her, as they certainly perceived it, female duties, prompting a comment from the local press that the cooking classes for girls were:

“a very much appreciated feature, attractive to those who have any idea of aspiring to the mistresship of a household.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

It was at these meetings that such essential topics as ‘Healthy Homes’ and ‘Food and Drink’[[36]](#footnote-36) were discussed. Though little would seem to have been reported on their activities there is evidence that the association was still in existence in 1888.[[37]](#footnote-37) Though it is impossible to firmly establish what class of female normally attended, it is not difficult to imagine that the girls from the poorest families were very unlikely to have been involved.

The Upper Thomas Street school hall also actively sought to provide enlightenment to the population, only in this case catering for the male only. Seemingly following the lead of The Lozells Chapel’s instigation of a Young Men’s Early Sunday Morning School For Men in 1877, beginning with a lecture on ‘Pickwick Papers’[[38]](#footnote-38) it to sought to establish a similar institution providing what seems to have become a standardised pattern of provision. Beginning some two years later with weekly meetings, an early presentation being a lecture on ‘Periodical Literature’ to, unfortunately not a large audience, it continued to provide for any male presumably who desired an educational opportunity. Formed as it was to provide:

“undenominational teaching of Christian truth and the promotion of Christian endeavour amongst its scholars; also to give assistance in obtaining elementary knowledge. The books used are The Bible for reading lessons and copy books for writing,”

it commenced its existence with 34 scholars and seven teachers. However by the end of 1880 this had changed to a most respectable 18 members of staff and no less than 289 pupils.

Nevertheless, during this year attendances appear to have fallen and, in an effort to find out why visits were made to the homes of the missing individuals to ascertain the reason for their non-attendance. The investigations provided the following reasons:

19 had left the district

28 could not be traced

5 were kept away by home duties

1 had been removed to an asylum

27 had given up through indifference

4 through causes not known.[[39]](#footnote-39)

For those who did attend the school, besides being provided with a modicum of education also had the opportunity to obtain several other benefits. Not only did the school have a library, containing some 180 books and open to all pupils on Sunday mornings but also a Provident Sick Society and Savings Fund that had been formed to cover periods of illnesses that the members may suffer. In this particular year some £22 8s 3d was raised in subscriptions and £21 0s 7d paid out to unfortunate members. In regards to meetings alternate Saturdays were used, where individuals could avail themselves for ‘free intercourse, perusal of newspapers and amusements by means of draughts and other games.’ Yet, despite the obvious enthusiasm and good intent shown by the staff there are indications that they were not totally successful in all the areas that they wished to have influence in. Perhaps as a sign of the independence of mind inherent within the general population of Aston Manor, as will be indicated in chapters 7 and 8 the particular ambitions of a Councillor White and Mr. Rutherford were rebuffed. These gentlemen in attempting to form within the school a Total Abstinence Society found a less than an overwhelming response. Indeed as a local newspaper stated the:

“Society has no income to enable it to prosecute its work as energetically as desirable.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Occasionally the school presented musical entertainment, as in 1879 when, on 1st November there was presented a Miscellaneous Concert, featuring many artists oflocal fame. Also within the programme was a thirty voiced choir who sang what was described as ‘Glees’, under the conductorship of a Mr. H. Tunaley, organist and choirmaster of St. Mary’s, Aston Brook.[[41]](#footnote-41) The following years witnessed other similar presentations though occasionally they were undertaken in order to benefit local charities and causes. One such event, held in 1885 was aimed at raising funds for the local workhouse.[[42]](#footnote-42) Clearly well-liked, these type of events continued for some considerable number of years, though it would seem that this pattern of entertainment increasingly moved towards a more popularist vein. It is recorded that in 1894, the school presented a concert featuring The Clarence Banjo Band, who were obviously extremely popular within the area, as they had appeared at many locations including, in the same year The Albert Road School.[[43]](#footnote-43) Though nothing more is reported of this sort of presentation it would not be beyond possibility to believe that others in the years following were presented.

That this organisation was successful can perhaps be gleaned by the report by the local press of the leaving of a member of staff, a Mr. W. J. Nicholls. The farewell ceremony, held on 8th March, 1880 saw the staff and scholars meet, over one hundred and sixty of them attending the farewell. Mr. Nicholls who had previously announced that he was going to take up residence in Edgbaston, Birmingham explained, with regret, that this meant that could no longer meet the demands of the school. The tone of this establishment and perhaps others of the same ilk can possibly be identified when Mr. Nicholls’ remarks are considered. He reminded the men to be ‘regular’ in their attendance and that by attending they would be rewarded by ‘glimpse of the truth’. He also warned them of temptation, of drink, of swearing, dishonesty and laziness, of which he said: “he had great experience?”[[44]](#footnote-44) However, it would seem, that sometime after this time the school, for a number of years appears to have ceased to exist, for there are no further indications of activity. Yet, in 1905 The Aston Times indicated, in reporting on this school’s 2nd annual meeting and prize distribution that it could possibly have been resurrected.[[45]](#footnote-45) Perhaps the reason for this was that Local Board had been active in attempting to provide further educational establishments in an obvious attempt to further bolster the educational standards of the Manor. It was from as early as 1894 that this school, along with those of Vicarage Road, Alma Street and Burlington Street were chosen to provide evening classes. The Local Board, in proposing this extension of educational provision were, at pains to state that there was no charge for the lessons. There was no excuse, in the words of a columnist of the Aston Times: “for the poor to remain ignorant,”[[46]](#footnote-46) this ambition presumably, by this time encompassing both sexes. However, the opportunity to advance the mind was not only limited to the secular establishment. The church community, allied to local school halls in also recognising the value of education were additionally an important factor in its provision.

One church, St. Mary‘s appears to have been particularly active, via the school that carried its name, managing to form, late in our period what seems to have been, at least for the Manor a unique Debating Society. This, formed, around 1900 appears to have accepted the female as an active participant, holding, though on an irregular basis ‘Ladies Nights,’ choosing on one particular occasion a subject rather apt for the time: ‘Why we need the Vote’!![[47]](#footnote-47) This society however, if the local press were to be believed did not exist for any great length of time, as there are no further instances, from 1891 onwards of such meetings occurring, this perhaps simply reflecting a lack of press coverage. The school did however still maintain a contribution to the recreational scene, by providing throughout much of our period popular concert presentations. These, always of a similar nature featured what may be termed popular light operatic type songs. One such presentation, which according to the local press was a ‘Penny Popular Concert’ featured renditions of ‘Phylis dyes her Tresses Black’ and ‘By The Fountain’ sung by such artists as The Lynn Quartet and the Misses Taylor and Morris.[[48]](#footnote-48) Nevertheless, as the period progressed and the effect of the 1971 Education Act became more profuse other educational facilities appeared to provide.

The Lozells Chapel from the early years of our period until the advent of WWI also consistently presented attractions. From early lectures on such subjects as already indicated, it, like The Upper Thomas School became seemingly so well established that it was to be able, in 1905 to provide educational classes, perhaps in an attempt to confront the many opportunities that the ever expanding world of recreation was able to offer.[[49]](#footnote-49) That such a response would be thought necessary might be identified as being a result, as will be indicated later, of an identification of a perceived link between sport, recreation and the inns and taverns of the Manor. Additionally, from within the non-conformist religious community The Park Road [[50]](#footnote-50) and The Wesleyan Chapels*,* both presented the obligatory lecture and, on occasions what appeared to have been very proficient concerts of sacred music, the latter on one occasion providing a rendition of, again, the ‘Messiah’ performed by some ninety artists.[[51]](#footnote-51)

In regards to the staging of what might be described as ‘serious musical entertainment’ another venue which appears to have adopted a positive and pro-active attitude was The St. Peter’s Mission*.* From the turn of the century this venue was the scene of many concerts, many free of entrance charge. Typical of these was one held in January 1909 when, under the arrangement of a Mr. W. D. Evans a programme of what appears to have been ‘Drawing Room’ style renditions was presented. Songs such as ‘The Village Blacksmith’ and ‘Bother the Man’ were interspersed with selections on the pianoforte by a Miss Hodgetts. This type and style of entertainment certainly seems to have been adopted by a great many of the Manor’s religious institutions and was continued until, it would seem up to the end of our period of interest.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Yet despite the impressive efforts of these locations it is another venue, Christ Church, whichappears to have been to the fore in providing opportunity in the area. This establishment seemingly provided a constant flow of both musical and educational opportunities. In 1875, for example under the auspices of the Mutual Improvement Society the church hosted a talk on ‘Natures Voice of God’ for which admission was 5d and 3d,[[53]](#footnote-53) whilst the next week The Young Men’s Improvement Societydebated the merits of ‘The Works of Scott and Dickens,’ the vote being cast in favour of the latter author.[[54]](#footnote-54) The following year in addition to a programme of lectures the Church presented a ‘Miscellaneous concert’,[[55]](#footnote-55) followed in the same year by another, ‘for the benefit of the building fund’, providing [again] a performance of a selection from the Messiah*,*admission 1/-, reserved 2/-.[[56]](#footnote-56) This rendition, featuring the Children’s Choir had, as additional performers members of the Festival Choral Society an organization, which, though including the well known local musician, Mr. Pountney appears not to have any connection with Aston Manor, other than performing within its borders. All of these performers sang to the accompaniment of the organ playing of a Mr. Harrod, who also somewhat unusually also conducted! The years following were witness to many other events, predominantly lectures, though often presented by and in regards to temperance and the temperance movement, One of these: ‘Who owns the Public Houses’ was particularly vitriolic, basing its stance upon the ‘evil intentions of the licensee and of the anti-social position that he or she took by selling strong drink.’[[57]](#footnote-57)

That the movement could take such a stance was fundamentally based upon the premise that those who did not make a conscious effort to redeem themselves from lowly social stature and to improve their education and personal development, were labelled failures. The meetings were, in reality a reflection of the ideology of Samuel Smiles and his concept of ‘Self Help’,[[58]](#footnote-58) a idiom that believed in the concept of individualism and that this was best because it “brings with it manly satisfaction of difficulties subdued."[[59]](#footnote-59) It was within this ideal, that, in 1900 the venue, established an educational facility, albeit for men only. Beginning with only eleven members by 1905 it had over three hundred attending. Though no evidence exists as to whether this expansion continued, there are certainly many indications that the facility continued to survive, certainly up to 1911.[[60]](#footnote-60) Additionally, and most importantly it was this church that was, for many years the home of perhaps the most successful musically inclined society in the Manor, the Aston Choral Society, who, as previously mentioned performed widely in the area and, towards the end of the century sang many times in the church. That this society continued to have an affinity with the location can be perhaps verified when it is noted that, in 1905 a Choir concert was presented,[[61]](#footnote-61) which was followed, during the ensuing years by renditions, of what was obviously the most popular sacred piece of the age, ‘The Messiah’.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Another location which appears to have provided the individual with the opportunity to enjoy musical recreation on a regular basis was St. Paul’s. Though not figuring in the early years of our period of interest towards the turn of the century it appears to have been extremely active. During the mid 1880s the church instigated a ‘concert season’, a feature which was still active at 1911. In 1905 those responsible for its presentation decided to present, on one particular occasion an event that was somewhat more ambitious, in that it provided, what was described in the local press as a ‘A Choir Festival’.[[63]](#footnote-63) One such event however that perhaps personifies what was normally offered was one that was held in the January of 1909. The performance arranged by a Mr. W. D. Evans contained, amongst others the attractions of Miss Hodgetts, with her ‘wonderful talent’; Mr. Glendon, ‘a beautiful tenor’ singing ‘The Veterans Song’ and a humorous rendition of ‘Bother The Man’ by Mrs. Riley. These, and other artists ensued that the programme, in the words of The Aston Times:“continued in fine style, ending, as it did with a Mrs. Fitzer singing ‘I Am Afraid To Go Home in the Dark’, all of which was: “enjoyed with refreshments.”[[64]](#footnote-64) This particular establishment it must be noted was also innovative in that in 1892 it formed a Literacy Society, though if the contents of the newspapers are to be believed it did not function for any great length of time, no reports appearing after 1895.[[65]](#footnote-65) Perhaps typical of the type of presentation provided was one that was enacted in October of 1893. Here, a Mr. H. Rallings delivered a paper on ‘Light of Other Days,’ this being on chemical experiments. As an added attraction, it would seem he actually manufactured the gases that he was lecturing about!![[66]](#footnote-66) It was the forming of this society that appears to have prompted another similar society The Wheeler Street Literacy Society. However like the St. Paul’s model it also appears to have had a short life, seemingly only existing around 1892.[[67]](#footnote-67) It is perhaps the emergence of these societies, despite their brief existence that can be identified as an indicator as to what the various venues were increasingly presenting, which was fundamentally secular in tone. It could be argued, with some strength that the notion of utilising the secular was a reflection of an acceptance of what the Mann Census had indicated that, at least in Aston Manor an evangelical approach was required to halt the perceived movement away from the church.

These attempts to provide opportunities so as to draw the people into the church fold were however not solely linked to recreation. For, as stated previously like the public house the church was now always prepared to open its doors to local secular organizations. Many of the more middle class organizations, in rejecting the public house as a headquarters chose instead the school hall. In this way The True Albion Sick Society, The Aston Manor for Children Fresh Air Fund, The St. Mary‘s Mutual Improvement Society, The Aston Natural History and Photographic Society, which had been formed from the two separate societies and the Ye Olde Aston Village Money Society all found their homes in various church hall locations.

Yet, it has to be recognised that this location, and indeed the others of Aston Manor were, despite their obvious importance, in reality catering for a minority. For the vast majority of the people who wished to listen to music it is likely that this type of presentation had little attraction. Fortunately, for them there were other innumerable opportunities, which often as not were considerably less than ‘high-brow.’ For, whilst many may have found the soaring notes of Handel majestic it must be supposed that the majority would have preferred a somewhat more everyday entertainment. Such music was provided by a number of local bands including Syners & Gilmers Grand Military Band*,*[[68]](#footnote-68) who often played in Aston Park and The Clarence Banjo Band and Minstrel Combination who often appeared at the Albert Road School,[[69]](#footnote-69) the latter of these being particularly popular, reflecting what appears to have been a local interest in the music of this particular instrument. In existence at the same time, the Red Rose Mandolin and Banjo Band also played many of church functions in and around Aston Manor.[[70]](#footnote-70) Indeed such was the popularity of the banjo, that on March 31st 1898 an Olly Oakley, a nationally known banjo player, himself from Birmingham who may be considered to have been responsible for the local popularity of the instrument presented a banjo concert at the Victoria Hall, the ‘Birmingham Daily Post’ stating that:

"Olly Oakley, the well-known zither-banjoist, has every reason to be satisfied with his first banjo concert. A capital programme was admirably presented before a numerous and appreciative audience.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

There were however several other rather unusually named bands who were performing within Aston Manor at this time. One, The Mohawk Minstrels also seemed particularly popular, having been engaged to play at many venues in the area, after forming in 1882.[[72]](#footnote-72) There was also The Oberon Minstrels, who, though often performing at the smaller locations of the area many times played the Victoria Hall, to sometimes quite large audiences. This particular group had, as its lead vocalist a Mr. Trevelyn whom it was said ‘possessed a falsetto voice of more than average power.’[[73]](#footnote-73) All of these, and indeed the banjo instrument itself seemingly remained popular throughout the 1880s but after this time they and the instrument, with a few exceptions fell out of favour. However, perhaps for the more discerning there were bands, often of a genuine military stature who occasionally performed at various venues in the Manor, including the park and Lower Grounds. That such attractions continued right up to the end of our period of interest can be verified when it is noted that The Royal Engineers performed within the park area less than five months prior to the annexation of Aston Manor into Birmingham.[[74]](#footnote-74)

For those individuals however who had a particular interest in the acquisition of knowledge or simply wished to spend time reading and who did not wish to be involved with the number of religious institutions which provided educational opportunities there had developed during our period the public library. This facility introduced in 1879 quickly became a major site for educational recreation,[[75]](#footnote-75) principally via not only through the provision of reading material but also the ever popular lecture event. These, which commenced on a regular basis in 1885, were predominantly secular in nature and sought to cover a great many varied subjects. Topics as diverse as ‘Wandering in Spain,’[[76]](#footnote-76) The Human Stove (a consideration of respiration)[[77]](#footnote-77) and ‘Darkest Africa’[[78]](#footnote-78) vied with the occasional surprising attraction. One of these, which must have greatly intrigued those who saw it advertised and prompted what seemed to have been a very good attendance was when the guest speaker was a Mr, Joseph Ojijatekha Brant-Sero. This individual who could boast of being a direct descendent of the famous staunch supporter of Britain in her struggle with the Colonists in the American War of Independence Canadian Mohawk Chief Captain Joseph Thayendanegea[[79]](#footnote-79) arrived in Aston Manor to give a talk on Canada and the Indian within which part of his delivery was given in his native language.[[80]](#footnote-80) Just what those attending this attraction thought of it is difficult to imagine. The popularity of these lectures can be judged from the fact that the site was still presenting them at least until the outbreak of WWI. In 1908, for example two particular lectures were delivered on the illuminating subjects of ‘Light the magician’ and ‘Nature’s wonderful architecture’. Though it is certainly questionable whether such subjects would have appealed to the mass of the local population the fact was that, according to the local press both provided for a good attendance.[[81]](#footnote-81) Whatever the opinion as to the type of presentations made within its walls the library had clearly become a well utilised facility within the Manor, a fact clearly recognised by not only the local newspapers reports extolling its virtues but also from a report that was published in 1894.

Within this, both departments of the library, the reading and lending sections were shown to have made satisfactory progress in usage. The lending library in particular had enjoyed a very pleasing increase, from 267 to 289 lends daily and that it could now boast of some four thousand borrowers. Additionally, it was stated a full set of twenty five volumes of Novello Music Primers had, along with a fully classified catalogue of music held been introduced, which must have been of great value given the level of interest in music which clearly existed within the Manor. The report also indicates that some £99 8s 6d had been spent on new books whilst £53 11s 7d had been expended on newspapers and periodicals. Of course there is no way of knowing what books were taken out but it can safely be assumed that the likes of Dickens and Scott would have been well represented. The report was also at pains to report that its lecture facilities were also well utilised. Indeed it pointedly remarked that on occasions the facility had to turn would-be patrons away stating;

“That sixteen lectures were included in the programme, and on every occasion except one large numbers had to be refused admission owing to the crowded state of the room thus evidencing the urgent need of a larger hall for this purpose.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

Though originally providing criticism at the cost of the construction, both in capital and rating terms, by the end of the century it certainly had the backing of the local press. For, despite the fact that by 1899 it would appear there was a need for a rating increase to enable it to be modernised, the Aston Times, for example provided fulsome support:

“If it should be necessary to exceed the arbitrary limit of the penny rate we believe in, at the present circumstances it would not be unpopular. A properly equipped free library is an indispensable supplement to the work of Board Schools, Evening Schools and Technical Schools and the appreciation in which it is held is a good measure of the advance in general education and knowledge which prevails.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

It would seem that the Manor’s governing Fathers were not swayed by any sense of cost. The improvements that were made to the facility, in the light of such comments allowed it to continue to be a vibrant element within the provision of recreation, particularly concerning lectures and providing a much used amenity right up to, and certainly beyond the demise of the Manor in 1911.

Such was the popularity of the library that the Council was ever increasingly tempted to expand its provisions. It was thus in 1903 that a new establishment commenced at Aston Cross. This new facility began issuing books on the 4th December and by 1904 it is recorded that over six hundred borrowers had enrolled and had taken out some eight hundred items, the total literary holdings for the library being near 1,500 volumes. Fortunately, for the hard pressed and concerned ratepayer of the Manor the cost of this new recreational establishment did not become a burden on the public purse. For, not only had the acquistion costs of the site been met by the ever benevolent Ansells brothers, William and Edward but the expense in regards to the actual construction of the building had been defrayed by the philanthropic American millionaire Andrew Carnigie.[[84]](#footnote-84)

However, when in 1908 the Council was offered another substantial sum to provide a further library facility the old problem of whether the Manor could afford it came up again. Despite the fact that the same millionaire had made available, what was a very substantial sum of £8,000 towards the cost his offer, this time was not unconditional. For attached was the proviso that the council themselves had to contribute some £4,000. However, due to the fact that William Ansell had himself donated a quarter of this sum the council‘s liability was thus reduced to £3,000. The local press however was in no doubt as to whether or not accept the offer. In writing an open letter to the Council the editor of the Aston News stated:

“It is the duty of the Council to give full consideration to the offer, weighing well the pros and cons but at the same time always bearing in mind that if the £8,000 is now lost ‘poor’ Aston might never be able to remove the present overcrowded library with its valuable collection of books, to larger premises which are absolutely necessary, not only for the visitors and borrowers, but for the officials.”[[85]](#footnote-85)

However, it would appear that on this occasion the Fathers of Aston Manor would not commit themselves to any further imposition of the local rates and the offer was rejected. That such an attractive scheme could be discarded was, if the Aston News is to be believed down to pressure exerted by neighbouring Birmingham. In an article which discussed the history of Local Government in Aston Manor it made it quite clear that it was the pressure of this council on the Manor, concerned at the cost implications when annexation eventually occurred which had fundamentally swung the issue away from acceptance.[[86]](#footnote-86)

The presentation of the lecture and debate therefore certainly was a substantial element within the recreational landscape of Aston Manor. One particular association, The Aston Progressive Debating Society, for example who met in Church Road certainly, from the turn of the century held meetings which on one occasion discussed the proposition that the ‘Bible is not opposed to Spiritualism.’[[87]](#footnote-87) However this society did not reserve its attentions purely for the religiously inclined, for on one occasion it provided a somewhat more elaborate evening. On this instance it presented a rather elaborate mock trial. Here, in front of Mr. Justice Imperialism and a jury Mr. Free Trade was charged with:

“being the direst cause of great unemployment in this country and the consequent ruin to thousands and further charged with aiding and abetting crime. Lunacy and pauperism, the prisoner pleading ‘Not Guilty’.”

The case was prosecuted by Mr. Fiscal Policy KC whilst the defence was given by Mr. Equality. After witnesses such as ‘unemployed’ and ‘underfed’ were called the jury retired. After refreshments and deliberation they returned to give a ‘Not Guilty’ verdict.[[88]](#footnote-88) Though these examples might indicate, with the obvious exception of the previously stated event a rather staid, repetitive scope there was one, educationally biased attraction which, for a very short period undoubtedly caught the public imagination within Aston Manor and indeed elsewhere. This was in regards to the phenomenon which went under the banner of ‘The Spelling Bee.’

This recreational pastime, which appears to have emerged in the Aston Manor area at the end of 1875 was, in reality little more than a spelling competition, involving competitors competing on a knock-out basis for prizes, normally books but occasionally cups. That such an idea emerged, not only in the Manor but all over the country perhaps had its origin in the drive towards universal education, epitomized by the 1871 Education Act. Its introduction into the recreational world of the Manor can be perhaps be perceived not only as a recognition of the value of education but a means by which the discipline that was required of the masses in an industrial society could be encouraged and taught. However the ‘Spelling Bee’ was not a British idea, having originated from within the United States of America, the phase being originally associated with a gathering, first coming to light in 1769 when the Boston Gazette announced that:

“last Thursday about twenty young ladies met at the house of Mr. L on purpose for a Spinning Match, or what is called in the country a Bee.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

Given the fact that no records exist of local newspapers prior to late 1875 it could be supposed that, in regards to Aston Manor the first recorded indication of the attractions first introduction into the recreational landscape came in 1876. This was when The Aston Chronicle announced that at Christ Church School room, through The Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Society an event would be held on the 1st February.[[90]](#footnote-90) This, refereed by the incumbent, The Rev. W. Walters and interrogated by a Mr. J. Rogers esq. appears to have been the first such event in the area though it does seem that similar meetings may have already taken place in Birmingham.

This presentation appears to have been very well attended, the competitors entrance fee having been set at 1/-, was ‘inconveniently crowded’ and was preceded by a Mr Harrod, the church organist and his son in a duet of harmonium and piano of music by Mendellsohn followed by tuneful renditions of, amongst other songs the ‘The Friar of Orders Grey’, ‘A Merry Gipsy Girl am I’ and ‘The Blind Girl’s Dream’ by Mr. A. H. Allbut; Mrs. Baldwin and a Miss Perkins respectively. After the completion of this introductory entertainment the stage was cleared and after a few words from the vicar within which he voiced the opinion that the ‘Spelling Bee’ was: “an unmixed boon and one of the very best things ever imported from America” the contest began.

Though the competitors managed to negotiate the first series of words the next ‘oscillate’ and ‘pommell’ brought down two ladies. As the night progressed more of the entrants failed, not being able to cope with such as ‘asinine’, ‘chamois’ and ‘dilettante’ though, on this last one a young gentleman is reported as complaining that he had been given ‘an uncommon word’. Eventually some five persons remained, these eventually coming down to the final two, a Mr. Whittall and a Mrs. Simpson, the former triumphing after the lady failed on ‘connoisseur’. The prizes, of Knights ‘Half-Hours with The Best Authors’ and Samuel Smile’s ‘Thrift’ were then presented and the evening ended with another session of musical entertainment and, finally the singing of the National Anthem.[[91]](#footnote-91)

The following weeks witnessed a number of other such presentations, including one sponsored by the Aston Chronicle*.* This, it would seem was little more than an advertising ploy to increase the newspapers circulation. Held in the school room of St. Mary’s it offered not only the actual competition but also, as appears normal in such presentations additional musical entertainment along with what were described as valuable prizes. Again the entrance charge made for the competitors was 1/- whilst for the audience it was 1/- for front and 6d for back seats. This event, the newspaper proudly announced would be adjudicated by Mr. Ansell and a Dr. Keyworth, the latter, who would be armed with two large volumes of the Imperial Dictionary: “which should give perfect satisfaction to those newcomers that may not be acquainted with Dr. Keyworth’s ability.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

On a wave of enthusiasm Christ Church again repeated its previous presentation in February[[93]](#footnote-93) whilst, in several locations skirting the Manor others were enacted, which were certainly accessible for people residing in the area. Indeed it appears that the potential for bringing in people into their respective religious locations had been recognised by the religious community and this inspired them to place an advertisement in the local press stating that it was their intention to provide more of these competitions, uttering, as they did:

“that it was highly approved of and heartily encouraged by the Vicars and Churchwardens as well as the Ministers and leading men of the Baptist, Congregationalists and Wesleyan bodies of the district.”[[94]](#footnote-94)

This recreational opportunity which seems to have quickly become extremely popular in many parts of the country surprisingly did not however seem to sustain an extended appeal to many of Aston Manor. There does not appear to have been any further presentations and the ‘craze’ appears to have disappeared as fast and it arrived!! That such a situation could have been arrived at is perhaps explained by the very same newspaper which originally attempted to benefit from it, The Aston Chronicle*.* In an editorial on 1st April, 1876 it stated:

“We seem to be threatened with a plague of Bees. Announcements of Spelling Bees cover the walls and adorn the windows of the whole district. From Saltley to Erdington, from Moseley to Handsworth, from Balsall Heath to Aston, everywhere do Spelling Bees abound. Among churchmen high and low and Dissenters from the demure Quaker to the liveliest Ranter each Chapel and Church and school seems to have set its heart on Spelling Bee prizes, from the silver or ‘electro’ teapot down to the half crown Shakespeare are offered to the doughty champion of orthography and dictionaries are everywhere at a premium. What is to be done? Some new element must be introduced or we shall be wearied or worried to death by the unvarying spellers” The same words are used for ‘flooring the victims, the same disputes arise as to the ‘c’ or the ‘k’, the ‘s’ or the ‘z’ in each case, so that your correspondent would have not difficulty in reporting a ‘Bee’ without ever stirring from his humble fireside”.[[95]](#footnote-95)

Perhaps the comments of an oddly titled correspondent to this newspaper, an ‘I Odd D. Rover’ summed up the attitude of many of the area when he wrote:

“The institution of the Spelling Bee reads like a rebuff to English schoolmasters and their result, which allows on a small proportion among those self-conscious of superior education as able to spell the words of their own language, is a disgrace to teachers. Would it not be wise that some quicker, easier and more correct plan be accepted!”[[96]](#footnote-96)

Attitudes like these seem to have personified the thoughts of many and as fast as it appeared ‘The Spelling Bee’ craze, at least in Aston Manor disappeared.

Perhaps however the most interesting recreational opportunity that the religious community offered was that which concerned the phenomenon known as ‘The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon’. This movement, founded by John Blackham, (1834-1923) of West Bromwich, a Congregationalist, was, in essence a movement that provided meaningful and acceptable recreation on a Sunday afternoon, aimed to counteract any other pastime on that day which breached the notion of Sunday to be a day of rest.[[97]](#footnote-97) In essence what was supplied were lectures, reading and religious instruction. Certainly when the figures are noted in regards to attendances within the area of Aston Manor it can be clearly perceived that a considerable number of people, including females were attracted. As can be seen from the figures not all the churches became involved, though it is clear that those who did enjoyed quite reasonable attendances:

Church of England St James 402

St James Mission 402

St. Paul’s, Lozells 82

St Silas, Lozells 155

Roman Catholic St Mary’s Hunters Row 360

Wesleyan Mansfield Road 81

Salvation Army 176

Undenominational 140 [[98]](#footnote-98)

If one considers that the PSA was a recreation, and in its broadest sense it can be considered so, for it was something that the individual did of his own volition then perhaps the figures are certainly impressive. Though little further information is available as to whether the movement continued to be successful it can however be established that at least two local venues, The Aston Baptist Church andAston Congregationalists were very active for a considerable period of time. It was reported in 1909 that the former on one instance provided aid for 230 poor children of the Manor. On this occasion each child was given, on the previous Saturday, the 16th of January, presumably on the Chapel premises what was described as a ‘substantial tea’ which contained:

1 Batch cake

plain and Current Cake

1 large Mince Pie

As much tea as they wanted

Sweets

And finally a visit from Father Christmas, carrying, it must be presumed gifts[[99]](#footnote-99)

whilst the latter drew an attendance of over three hundred to a Christmas concert of Cornet music and lecture by an Adjutant Jordan of the Salvation Army.[[100]](#footnote-100) This sort of attendance figure might rightly be considered quite impressive but it appears that this was almost the norm. For a week earlier the same number paraded, when at the church a Mr. John Langford presided over a class meeting.[[101]](#footnote-101) That such an attendance could be attained and sustained would indicate, as appendix v confirms that the church had responded well to the challenge presented by the 1851 Mann Census and that, by today’s standards their efforts were little short of amazing.[[102]](#footnote-102)

Nevertheless, what is perhaps most interesting in regards to religious attendance is that which concerns Sunday Schools. The figures clearly indicate that the religious communities were extremely successful in drawing in the younger generation, so much so that a local newspaper, The Aston and Handsworth Observer in its 10th July issue felt the need to comment on the performance of Aston Manor’s establishments. Under the heading ‘Sunday School Centenary, Aston Park School’ it reported on how the scholars from the various schools enjoyed a day of celebration in regards to their establishments. On a day of bright summer weather the Baptists of Christ Church and Yates Street and the Wesleyans of Lichfield Road along with the Congregationalists of Park Road combined to enjoy the day. After gathering at their respective churches in the afternoon they marched to the Park Road Chapel where dual celebrations were to be held, commencing with hymn ‘Dear Saviour We Gather’ accompanied by, it was stated by:

“The glittering of their medals, the living beauty and profusion of the lovely flowers brought by the children and their friends and now tastefully arranged upon the around pulpit and platform all combined to convey an impression not to be soon forgotten by those who has the pleasure of beholding it,”

whilst at the same time, at Thomas Street some 500 juniors gathered, again to sing hymns and to receive instruction. However, for these children there was an extra treat. For, on the Monday, after meeting again at the same location they were given what was described as an “abundant supply of milk and buns” after which, for a period of three hours they were able to enjoy games, sweets and toys.[[103]](#footnote-103) The fact that the interest of such a great number of children as time progressed was retained can be further established when it is noted that some two years later St. Paul’s organised a summer excursion for some 1,000 children including teachers to Sutton Coldfield Park. The party which had been drawn from the Manors Sunday School community were collected from various locations, infants from Alma Street; girls from Gower Street and the boys from the Chapel. The outing began with the party being taken on a ‘round about route’ to give them an enjoyable ride and, upon arriving at their destination a trip around the park was then undertaken. After finally reaching their destination, they not only received a good tea but various amusements, finally arriving back early enough, it can be presumed for a normal bedtime.[[104]](#footnote-104)

That such vibrant attendance figures were maintained is again made clear when local reports on the occasion of The Sunday School jubilee celebrations a year later, in 1893 are considered. Here, it is recorded that all of the schools plus a number from outside the area provided pupils to march in a parade which was led by The Salvation Army and St. Matthew‘s Bands. After arriving at Aston Park games were organised which were watched by, it was reported some 1,000 people who had paid the 2d entrance fee to see them, this figure being in addition to the 4,000 young people who had attended. After a short time an afternoon meal was provided, consisting of tea and buns, each individual school providing for its own members. After the children had finished games were again provided, these consisting of skipping, three-legged and sack races and finally a tug-o-war, this latter event being eventually won by Yates Street, a school from Aston Parish. During the whole of the festivities there was music and a ventriloquist act by ‘Professor Henry Richards’ with his ‘talking folks.’ Additionally, for those capable of playing there was tennis and croquet. However, children being children there was a need for the service of an ambulance attendant, when, in a total accident one young lad suffered a damaged arm after being hit by a swing. After eventually finishing their playtime, as a final treat the Hall was opened for their inspection. After enjoying a guided tour they were, at dusk assembled together and returned home.[[105]](#footnote-105) Again, some seven years later, in the 30th June issue The Aston News was able to report that on the 23rd the children who attended the Sunday Schools of Aston Manor, numbering some 890 had their annual outing. They were taken again to Sutton Park and enjoyed sports and games of all kinds and, perhaps more importantly for the children, as seems the tradition given a good tea.[[106]](#footnote-106)

The situation did not fundamentally change as our period of interest drew to a close, for there are ample examples of the Sunday School community thriving. On one occasion, for example in 1909 in an event organised by the Birmingham Sunday School Union the Aston Manor area was impressively represented. Marching with other representatives from the centre of Birmingham to Victoria Square for a service the Aston contingent, comprising of Aston Manor Baptists; Burlington Hall; Bevington Road; Christ Church Baptists and Elkington Street separated and with a band marched to Aston Park. Again, as in previous events of this nature tea and games were provided. Additionally professional musical entertainment was also supplied along with the opportunity to partake in Maypole dancing. After these attractions had been exhausted the Meadow area provided the children the opportunity to enjoy an exhibition by local Boy Scouts of their particular skills. Finally at dusk, after the National Anthem the children marched back to their respective headquarters.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Of course not all recreational events were of such an expansive nature. One of the most common events that were provided for the locals to enjoy and one that is as common today as then is the Bazaar. These functions were, as now more often as not held to raise funds for necessary repairs to their respective churches and chapels. St Paul’s for example, in addition to its own premises used the Victoria Hall many times, on one particular occasion to raise the finance so as to allow for the repair of the church organ.[[108]](#footnote-108) Though many are recorded within the pages of the local newspapers these reports were normally so flimsy that they provide little information of any real value. However, in regards to one such event, connected to The Aston Villa Wesleyan Chapel of Lozells this is clearly not the case. Held, as many were to raise funds for the upkeep of the church it was staged over a period of four days, containing as it did some rather unusual features. Not only did it have all the usual items and attractions that can normally associated with such events but others that were to say the least strange for a church based promotion. Events such as Wood Sawing for Ladies, vied for attention alongside Washing Competitions, both for ladies and gentlemen, entrance for both 6d for competitors, 3d for spectators. Additionally there was entertainment for the children in the form of Professor John Green’s Ventriloquist Entertainment along with children’s concerts and for those who were keen gardeners a floral show. All of this was contained in a presentation that offered to its visitors, on purchasing goods a chance to redeem their 6d entrance fee via having it set against any items purchased. It is not recorded if the Chapel achieved its target but what they certainly did was to provide a bazaar that was fundamentally different and sadly not repeated, from any that was held up to the time of its presentation.[[109]](#footnote-109) Nevertheless some six years later another event was presented that, if not coming up to the eccentricity of the former, was at least unusual in its approach.

For in putting on its bazaar in aid of the Mission Hall and to remove the quite substantial debt that it had incurred, this being some £750 the members decided to provide a ’Grand Scenic Bazaar’. To achieve this aim the main hall was transformed into an ‘old time village’. The handbook that accompanied this event stated that:

“Old Whitby is typified to a marvellous extent by the aid of canvas and brush and with the necessary quota of imagination it will be an easy matter to forget all else beyond the old-fashioned houses, and to imagine oneself in the midst of the most beautiful part of Whitby. The houses bear just the natural touch of dilapidation which comes of long years of battle with wind and weather and the grey walls, latticed windows and tiled roofs look down upon a scene as busy as any which could have been witnessed had the walls been stone, the windows of glass, the roofs of tile and the street really a thoroughfare in the busy port town of Whitby.”

Opened by Sir Oliver Lodge deputizing for The Duchess of Sutherland, who could not attend due to pressures of Parliamentary business the many stalls that were erected sold such items as flowers, fruits and sweets. The event which was staged firstly on the Tuesday and then repeated on the following Saturday also featured on the latter day children of the Mission who provided a specially arranged programme of musical entertainment.[[110]](#footnote-110)

While it is clear that some of the religious establishments of the area may not have contributed as much as others towards the recreational landscape, what is perhaps most surprising is that there are no references found within the areas considered here in regards to the major church of the Manor, St. Peter and St. Paul. Whether this was because of a lack of ambition on the part of the curate or whether as the premier religious venue of the Manor it was socially above popularism cannot be established. However, as will be indicated later this situation did change.

What has to be recognised however is that much of what was offered certainly may not have appealed to perhaps a very large percentage of the population of the Manor. After a hard week of labour or housework the attraction of edifying lectures, moralist sermons or light operatic vocalising may not have seemed very attractive. For the younger members of the community perhaps the street game was no doubt of more interest but here it might be recognised that parental authority, on many occasions may have overruled their preferences. It would not be outrageous to believe that many a child was packed off to Sunday school by his or her parents, either to give them some valuable privacy or, in an ideal world to improve their minds.

There was however, for persons who could afford the cost, the opportunity of obtaining for themselves private musical tuition. Certainly from the late 1880s advertisements began to appear in the local press offering instruction in this field. Though there were many such opportunities within the Birmingham area there was only one that constantly appeared that related to the Manor. This, which offered the skills and expertise of a Madame Woodwoolley nee Miss Birch, at ‘moderate terms’ instruction in the organ, pianoforte and singing presented, for those who could afford it the opportunity to obtain, what at the time was considered, at least by the ‘respectable’ a necessary social skill.[[111]](#footnote-111) It would seem that this lady offered her services for some years. However, after 1888 she no longer advertised and no further trace can be found of her.

Though the opportunities that have been indicated might well have provided for some of the Manor’s population the opportunity to partake in recreation it must be believed that, for some they did not. Given a ‘common sense understanding’ it must be concluded that perhaps for the great majority of the mass of people these various attractions were of little real interest. The question thus has to be asked: What were the alternatives? What else was there that was attractive enough, and of course affordable to tempt these individuals along with those who did partake in what was on offer into a new world of recreation and away from the lecture, music recital and semi-serious concert, as well, of course, if the individual was old enough, the public house.

It is to this question that this work now turns to and to perhaps the most spectacular recreational innovation that was introduced into Aston Manor, one that reflected a new, vibrant approach and perhaps typifies the inborn endeavour of the Victorian Age, The Aston Lower Grounds of Aston Manor.

1. J. M. Golby & A. W. Purdue, *The Civilisation of The Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750-1900,* England: Sutton Publishing, 1999, chp 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. F. von Raumer, England in 1841 in J. M. Golby & A. W. Purdue, *The Civilisation of The Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750-1900,* England: Sutton Publishing,

   1999, p80. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle.* 13th November, 1875. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 27th November, 1875. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Birmingham & Aston Chronicle,* 23rd October, 1875. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times*, 25th October, 1879 and 22nd November, 1879. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Aston News* 14th February, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times,* 8th November, 1879. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Aston News*, 15th August, 1891. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 21st October,. 1876., 12th November, 1892 and 2nd

    February, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Aston News*, 27th March, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For an advertisement proposing its formation see *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 11th December, 1875. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 5th February, 1876 and 23rd December, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Aston News,* 17th September, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Aston News*, 19th November, 1892. For a view of the work of this Choral Society see

    The Aston Choral Society, the Eighth Concert, Victoria Hall, Aston, 28th October, 1890,

    Leaflet, Lp55.66 Accession No. 285226. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 15th December, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Aston Times*, 2nd November, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Aston News*, 4th March, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Aston Times*, 21st January, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 15th October, 1887. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 8th October, 1904. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 17th March, 1888. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Aston Times,* 26th April, 1884. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Aston Times*, 8th October, 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Aston Times,* 24th May, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 27th November, 1875. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 18th February, 1882. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Aston Times,* 24th May, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Aston News*, 7th March, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 29th April, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Birmingham and Aston Chron*icle, 30th May, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 16th September, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 9th September, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. W. Showell, *Showells Dictionary of Birmingham,* England: Walter Showell & Sons,

    1885. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 16th September, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 31st March, 1877. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. W. Showell, *Showells Dictionary of Birmingham,* England: Walter Showell & Sons, 1885. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 14th February, 1877. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times*, 11th October, 1879 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times*, 13th March, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times*, 8th November, 1879. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Aston Times*, 14th December, 1885. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Aston Times*. 24th February, 1894.It is quite possible that this band appeared in the Birmingham Banjo Concert at Villa Park some two years later see *Aston News*,

    26th December, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times*, 13th March, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Aston Times*, 28th October, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Aston Times*, 25th August, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Aston Times*, 3rd April, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Aston News*, 7th November, 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Aston Times*, 28th October, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 18th November, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Aston Observer and Handsworth Times*, 14th February, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 30th January, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 6th November, 1875. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 13th November, 1875. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 20th May, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 15th July, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *Aston Times*, 12th May, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Samuel Smiles was a prolific writer, his most famous work is [*Self-Help*](file:///C:\wiki\Self-Help_(book)): *with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance ,* USA: Obscure Press, 2006, and A. Briggs, ‘Samuel Smiles and the Gospel of Work‘ in *Victorian People*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955. England: Pelican, Harmondsworth, 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. L. L. Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England,* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988, p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Aston Times*, 21st January, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *Aston News*, 22nd April, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 19th April, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *Aston Times*, 17th June, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *Aston Times*, 30th January, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. It was formed in the December of 1892 and appears to have lasted only a few months, presumably because of a lack of support, see *Aston News,* 3rd December, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Aston Times*, 28th October, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Aston News,* 3rd December*,* 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 4th June, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 5th January, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *Aston News*, 22nd April, 1905. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Olly Oakley, see *http://www.zither-banjo.org/pages/oakleyboig.htm* [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 6th October, 1888. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 17th November, 1888. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Aston News*, 17th June, 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Botwood H. A., *A History of Aston Manor, Past and Present,* Birmingham: Birmingham

    Museum and Art Gallery, 1987, pp39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 24th March, 1888. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 6th December, 1890. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 10th February, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. # Joseph (Thayendanegea) Brant,, Mohawk chief, born on the banks of the Ohio in

    # 1742; died at the old Brant mansion, Wellington Square, Canada, 24 November, 1807. His

    # father was a full-blooded Mohawk of the Wolf tribe. He fought as a Commissioned Officer

    # against the Colonists.. See W. L Stone, *Life of Joseph Brant-Thayendanegea: Including the*

    # *Border Wars of the American Revolution, and Sketches of the Indian Campaigns of Generals*

    # *Harmar, St. Clair, and Wayne*. USA: Adamanant Media Corporation, 2003.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 17th February, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. *Aston Times*, 7th April, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. *Aston Times*, 9th June, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *Aston Times*, 25th March, 1899. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Andrew Carnigie (1835-1919), born Scotland was taken by his parents to the United States

    of America as a child. After making his fortune in steel he undertook many acts of Benevolence, both in his adopted and country of birth. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *Aston News*, 21st November, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *Aston News*, 11th November, 1911 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. *Aston News*, 23rd August, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. *Aston News*, 2nd May, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. *The Boston Gazette*, 1769, Boston: United States of America. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 23rd January, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 1st February, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 12th February, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle,* 29th January, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 29th February, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 1st April, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 5th February, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. See appendix iv for a short reprise on the origins of The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. See Appendix v. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. *Aston News*, 23rd January, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. *Aston News*, 24th December, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. *Aston News*, 17th December, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. See appendix v for an overview of religious attendance as at 1892,

     *Aston News*, 10th December, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. *Aston and Handsworth Observer*, 10th July, 1890 [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. *Aston News*, 23rd July, 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. *Aston News,* 27th May, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. *Aston News*, 30th June, 1900. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. *Aston News*, 5th June, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 30th November, 1889 and *Aston News*, 24th December,1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. *Aston Villa Wesleyan Chapel Bazaar*, 1904, L18.3 Accession No. 185186. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. *Aston News*, 3rd December, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. *Birmingham and Aston Chronicle*, 31st October, 1885. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)