

*Methodist Central Halls as public sacred spaces*

Religion and Society Collaborative Research Studentship 2007-2010

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and the

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within the

AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Research Programme

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*APPLICATION DEADLINE FRIDAY JUNE 15TH 2007*

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## **Methodist Central Halls**

Few people know that the first sessions of the General Assembly of the UN in 1946 were held in a place of worship - Westminster Central Hall. Methodist Central Halls existed in most British cities as flexible, multi-functional spaces used on a daily basis for a wide range of purposes. They are widely perceived as public space but they are also sacred - camouflaged churches, created as sites for missionary activity and social outreach by a faith which from its origins has challenged the dichotomy between sacred and secular space.

Banned from Anglican churches, John Wesley and his followers preached in the open air and built up their following across Britain by holding their services in theatres and public halls. Wesley's own London HQ from 1739-1778, the Foundery, combined a place of worship with a dispensary, workshops and accommodation. This tradition was renewed in Victorian England by the Methodist reformer Hugh Price Hughes (1847-1902). Reacting to 1851 Census evidence of declining religious observance among the urban working class, Hughes argued for mission to be combined with welfare work, temperance activism and family entertainment to compete with the music hall and pub. To house Methodism's urban mission he initiated from 1885 onwards an ambitious construction programme, typically combining preaching spaces for over a thousand people (more than 2,000 in the Albert Memorial Hall Manchester of 1910) with shops, offices and meeting rooms. The construction programme continued until the 1920s, much of it financed by the flour magnate Joseph Rank. His work was continued by his like-minded son J. Arthur Rank who spent more than £1 m on Westminster Central Hall up to 1967. He also used popular culture to promote the interests of Methodism with his Religious Film Society, which grew in its turn into the Rank Organisation: the conglomerated British Film Industry was developed as an extension of the aims of the Central Hall movement.

Halls were and are used for a very wide range of public events: voting, concerts, plays, film-shows, trades-union meetings, employment exchanges, clinics, clubs and societies. Many of them occupy entire city blocks. Central Hall Westminster is a national landmark; Central Hall Manchester an unobtrusive street entrance. As urban multifunctional spaces they embody characteristics of great interest to urban designers.

The Central Halls are the most prominent monuments of urban non-conformity, and in terms of architectural history they represent a unique building type of great interest and relevance to the Religion and Society agenda. Yet they have never been studied in depth. There is no literature apart from a brief cyclostyled history published as *Occasional Paper No 15* of the Methodist Home Mission. The collaborative PhD project addresses a substantial gap in the literature.

## **The Collaborative Research Studentship**

This AHRC/ESRC-funded doctoral project is a collaboration between the Methodist Church Property office, based in Central Hall Manchester, and the University of

Manchester. It draws on the Methodist archives and other holdings of the John Rylands Library on Deansgate Manchester. The University of Manchester, the Deansgate library and the Methodist Central Hall in Oldham Street are all centrally located within twenty minute walking distances.

The Methodist Church promotes Christianity alongside social action and justice, and its research interests of the Church are centred around social inclusion and poverty, Church growth and the impact of the Church in the community. The project partner will be Ian Serjeant, Conservation Officer within the Methodist Property Office. A chartered town planner and member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, he is a graduate of the University of Manchester MA in Urban Design and has long-standing connections with Architecture and Planning disciplines at the University.

The University of Manchester has a uniquely strong relationship with the Methodist Church due to the permanent loan to John Rylands University Library of the Wesley Archive - the largest collection of printed and manuscript materials for the history of Methodism. The archivist, Dr Peter Nockles, is involved in the project.

The student will be attached to Manchester Architectural Research Centre. Launched in 2006 within the School of Environment and Development under the direction of Professor Simon Guy, MARC exists to promote social studies of architecture, including studies of building types. The two academic supervisors within MARC will be Professor Michael Hebbert and Dr. Andrew Crompton, and the student's review panel will include Dr Jeremy Gregory of the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures. An additional source of support will be Dr Peter Forsaith of the Methodist Studies Unit, The Welsey Centre, Oxford Brookes University.

### **What we aim to achieve**

The project has great relevance to the wider research agenda of the AHRC/ERSC Religion and Society programme. It will consider the use and transformation of Central Halls over a period of declining religious observance, and the changing meanings and potentials of these spaces whose design was deliberately both public and sacred.

We believe that a well-researched study of Methodism's Central Halls will not only fill an obvious research lacuna but may hold wider lessons and strategies for the design and use of religious space in the city today, including possible implications for the design of multi-faith spaces

### *Aims*

- to tell the story of the Methodist Central Halls as examples of an undocumented building type and as sites of social and religious significance
- through historical study of the creation and operation of these city-centre multi-functional structures, to address the concept of 'public sacred space'

- to consider how the social and cultural contributions of Central Halls may be maintained and developed for the future

### *Objectives*

- to create scope for a high quality doctoral dissertation on a significant under-researched topic
- to further the mission of MARC, the Manchester Architecture Research Centre for innovative scholarly contributions to the academic field of social studies of architecture
- to contribute to the growing literature studying building types both as architecture and as sites of social practice and cultural meaning
- to provide the Methodist Church, and particularly its Property Office, with a scholarly study of Methodism's principal city-centre assets
- through a study of England, and case studies of English provincial cities, to lay a basis for future comparative work on Central Halls and City Missions in the USA, Australia and other countries with a Wesleyan faith tradition

### **Proposed approach**

The project has a specific monographic focus on the Central Hall as a building type. The Methodist archives of the John Ryland University Library provide the basis for an outline narrative of the commissioning and operation of the Halls and their architectural history - by whom designed, in what style and to what specifications, how modified over time, and whether retained today by the Methodist Church or disposed for redevelopment or conversion. Equally, the project is about the buildings in use and their meanings for the church and the wider public. Research into the social and religious significance of the Central Halls over the long Twentieth Century in which religious affinity or observance have declined while places of worship remain prominent in the urban landscape and collective memory. Using visual and photographic material, it will involve interviews and oral history as well as press and archival sources, and a combination of a national narrative with case studies of particular cities and sites.

Year One of the doctorate is preparatory, with literature review, research training, initial visits to archives, and preparation of research plan. Year Two sees the completion of a national study. Year Three completes the research with case studies.

#### *1. Induction (September 2007)*

Ian Serjeant will arrange induction to the Methodist Property Office after the University's week-long induction programme for new postgraduate students in September 2007.

#### *2. Literature Review (October 2007-February 2008)*

in three parts covering i) social history of urban Non-Conformism, secularisation, urban change ii) architectural context, the study of building types iii) reconnaissance of Wesley Archive and Methodist records

*3. Fieldwork Preparation (March 2008 - July 2008)*

Detailed planning of fieldwork including dossier of contacts, interview schedule, identification of archival sources and material in personal papers, journal content analysis, and methodology statement. Submission of continuation report and panel review in summer 2008

*4. Compiling the national picture (August 2008 - November 2008)*

Data-collection in Wesley Archive, British Library, national press etc.

*5. Central Halls in England 1885-2008 (December 2008-March 2009)*

Write-up of the history of the rise and fall of Central Halls in their religious and urban context

*6. Case-study phase (July 2009-December 2009)*

Interview-based research to create profiles of specific Central Halls, present economic basis, pattern of use, perceptions of users, issues, prospects.

*7. Case-study chapter drafts (January 2010- February August 2010)*

*8. Final write-up and submission (April 2010- September 2010)*

**The academic supervisors**

Michael Hebbert MA, PhD, MRTPI, AcSS is a chartered town planner, editor of *Progress in Planning* (Elsevier Science) and Professor of Town Planning in the School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester. He was previously with the London School of Economics and before that at Oxford Brookes. He took his PhD under the supervision of Peter Hall at the University of Reading, having graduated with a formal first in Modern History at Merton College, Oxford in 1969. He has published on many aspects of planning history and practice and since winning the 1998-2000 Urbanism Fellowship of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, has specialized in aspects of design history. Recent work includes

- 'An Everyday Unity, the art of street architecture' in J-F Lejeune ed *Modern Civic Art: Sitte Hegemann and the Metropolis* London: Routledge 2007
- 'Town Planning versus Urbanismo' *Planning Perspectives* 21 (3) July 2006
- 'History Builds the Town: on the uses of History in Twentieth Century City Planning' (with Wolfgang Sonne) in Javier Monclus and Manel Guardia eds, *Culture Urbanism and Planning* (Ashgate 2006)
- 'Engineering, Urbanism and the Struggle for Street Design' *Journal of Urban Design* (2005) 10, 1, 39-59
- 'The Street as Locus of Collective Memory' *Society and Space* (2005) 73, 4
- 'New Urbanism - the Movement in Context' *Built Environment* (2004) 29, 3 193-209

He has long standing interest in the care and conservation of places of worship. From 1983-93 he was secretary, then chairman of the trust for the care of St Anne's Limehouse, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor. Since 1996 he has been trustee, and

for a time chair, of Ancoats BPT in its restoration of the redundant St Peter's Ancoats. And since 2002 he has served as a member of the Archdiocese of Westminster Historic Churches Committee.

Andrew Crompton MA BA BArch PhD is an architect and lecturer in the Manchester Architectural Research Centre at Manchester University. He has published papers on Edwardian Architects Lutyens and Edgar Wood and on scale and perception of the urban environment. In his work in practice he has worked on Church restoration and remodelling and is Chairman of Manchester University ecumenical chaplaincy management committee. Recent papers include:

- "Scaling in a suburban street" *Environment and Planning B* 32 p 191-197 2006
- "Perceived distances in the city as a function of time" *Environment and Behavior*. vol. 38 No. 2 2006 173-182.
- 'Distance perception in a small scale environment' (with F Brown) *Environment and Behavior*. Vol. 38 2006 656-666

Jeremy Gregory MA, DPhil (Oxford), is a Senior Lecturer in the History of Modern Christianity in the Religions and Theology Subject Area of the School of Arts, Histories, and Cultures. He has a particular interest in religious history of Manchester and the Wesley Archive, his many publications include: *Restoration, Reformation, and Reform, 1660-1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and their diocese* (OUP, 2000).

### **How to Apply**

We invite applications, from potential UK/EU research students, irrespective of disciplinary background, who have a 2.1 or above Bachelors degree and a good Masters qualification, and meet the eligibility criteria for AHRC or ESRC doctoral funding. All applications should be submitted through the PHD ARCHITECTURE option within the University's online Postgraduate Research application system:

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/postgraduate/howtoapply/>

For further information on the School of Environment and Development:

[www.sed.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk)

The deadline for online application, with cv and covering letter, is **Friday June 15<sup>th</sup>** and shortlisted candidates will be interviewed on **Friday June 29<sup>th</sup>**.

Admissions enquiries may be directed to:

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Postgraduate Research Admissions

School of Environment and Development

Harold Hankins Building

University of Manchester

Manchester

M13 9QH

Tel: +44 161 275 0336

samantha.blachford@manchester.ac.uk

## Central Halls - Some Initial Reading

English Heritage (2006) *Inspired: Securing a Future for Historic Places of Worship* (Campaign Website and resource portal <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/inspired/>)

Gilbert A D (1980) *The making of post-Christian Britain : a history of the secularization of modern society* London: Longman

Franck KA & Schneekloth LH *Ordering space : types in architecture and design* New York ; London : Van Nostrand Reinhold

Markus TA (1993) *Buildings & power : freedom and control in the origin of modern building types* London: Routledge

McLeod H ed (1995) *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830-1930* London: Routledge

Sails G (1970) *At the centre : the story of Methodism's central missions* (Home Mission Occasional Papers ; No. 15) London: Methodist Church Home Missions Dept

Wakelin M (1996). *J. Arthur Rank*. Oxford: Lion Books

Wakeling C (1983) *The Architecture of the Nonconformist Churches during the Victorian and Edwardian Years* (unpublished dissertation, Boston Spa)

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