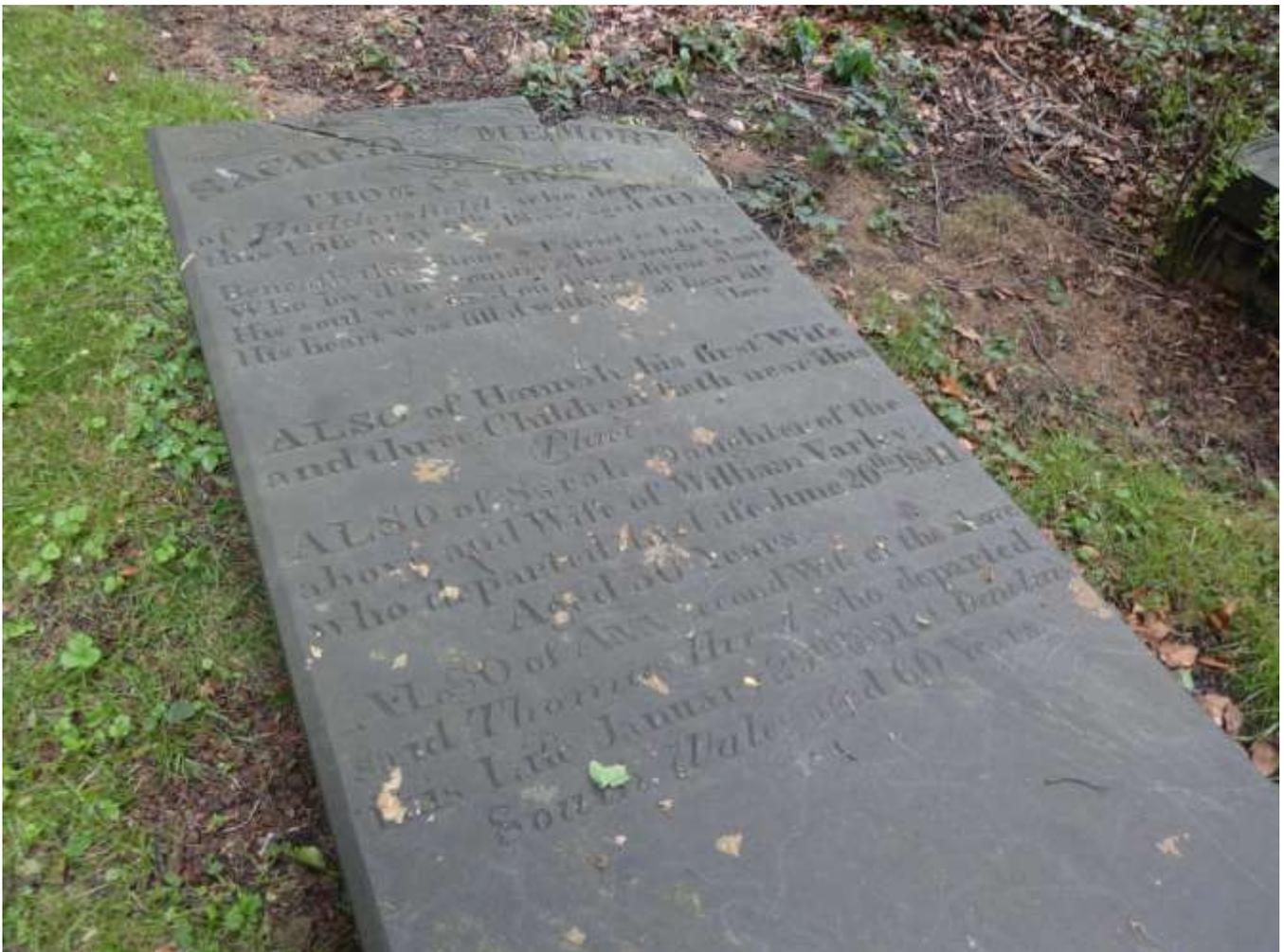


No. 14: Thomas Hirst - a forgotten hero

2018 should see the end of an ongoing saga for the PCC and for me as churchwarden. It is five years ago when we first became aware of the importance of one of the graves in our churchyard. The grave is of Thomas Hirst. It is not far from the main west door of the church, to the right as you look out of the doors.

Thomas Hirst died in 1833. He is of national historical importance as one of the earliest known founders of what became the Co-operative movement, which later became famous through the work of the Rochdale Pioneers.

The grave's ledger stone is cracked and part of it is missing. The church has now been granted faculty permission from the Diocese of Leeds for the stone to be restored and this work is due to take place later this year.



The earliest local co-operative movement started in Meltham Mills in 1827. Huddersfield's Co-operative Society opened in April 1829 and soon there were societies throughout the district.

A co-operative society was more than just a club to buy cheaper provisions. It had high aims - of reshaping society. The methods and intentions of its members were outlined in 1831 at the Second Co-operative Congress in Birmingham by John Heaton, the Huddersfield delegate, who described how local members had *'subscribed a small sum each weekly, which they employed in trade first by buying the necessaries of life at wholesale prices and retailing them out again to the public and themselves at retail prices – the difference being put into a common fund. In this manner it accumulated until they were able to employ their own shoemakers, tailors &c and at length, as in*

his own society at Huddersfield their profits and subscriptions united enabled them to set their members to work at their own trades. They had now 14 of their own members at work for the society on its own capital. They were manufacturing woollen cloth, waistcoatings &c...And thus they would go on increasing in wealth until they were enabled to rent and ultimately purchase land whereon they could raise their own food and erect dwellings and manufactories and become perfectly independent that is they would be always certain of the necessaries and comforts of life, aye and its allowable luxuries too by the exertion of their own moderate labour without the intervention of capitalists.'

The societies also had an educational role and the Huddersfield society opened a small library and seriously considered setting up a school.

Another founder of the local movement was the Rev C. B. Dunn of Cumberworth who stated at a meeting in Sheffield in 1832:

'Now co-operation purposes remedy all the moral, political and commercial abuses and disorders which are at present preying upon the vitals of the country... In fact I know no institution which, in its nature, is so essentially religious, being a practical development of the whole system of pure and primitive Christianity. It anticipates the establishment of a condition of social equality in which there will exist a community of interests, a community of happiness and a community of wealth.'

Thomas Hirst was a shopkeeper and cloth dresser, who had premises on Granby Street. He often spoke on platforms with the Rev Dunn advocating what the Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator periodical called 'our beautiful system'. Hirst also undertook an epic series of 'missionary tours', promoting the ideals of the co-operative movement; often travelling on foot, not only around the district but across the Pennines and as far afield as Kendal, Holywell in North Wales and Loughborough.

On his tours he often spoke to crowded meetings, often posing the question: *'Did not poverty like an armed man stalk through the land and force an entrance into every industrious man's habitation...'* and outlined an alternative vision of utopia, where *'Community of property, equality of rights and privileges, [stating] these are the fundamental principles of [a co-operative] system.'*

Hirst was also delegate for the Huddersfield area societies to the Cooperative Congresses held in Birmingham in 1831 and London and Liverpool in 1832. At London he exhibited a collection of cooperatively made goods from the north of England and condemned, not the use of machinery itself but the *'ill directed production of that machinery.'* Denouncing the economic system of *'competition and monopoly'*, his conclusions won him the cheers of the delegates *'Strange that riches should lead to poverty – abundance to want – and plenty to starvation. [He] trusted this would not be put in printed history, for generations unborn would think those who lived in the present day not right in their heads.'*

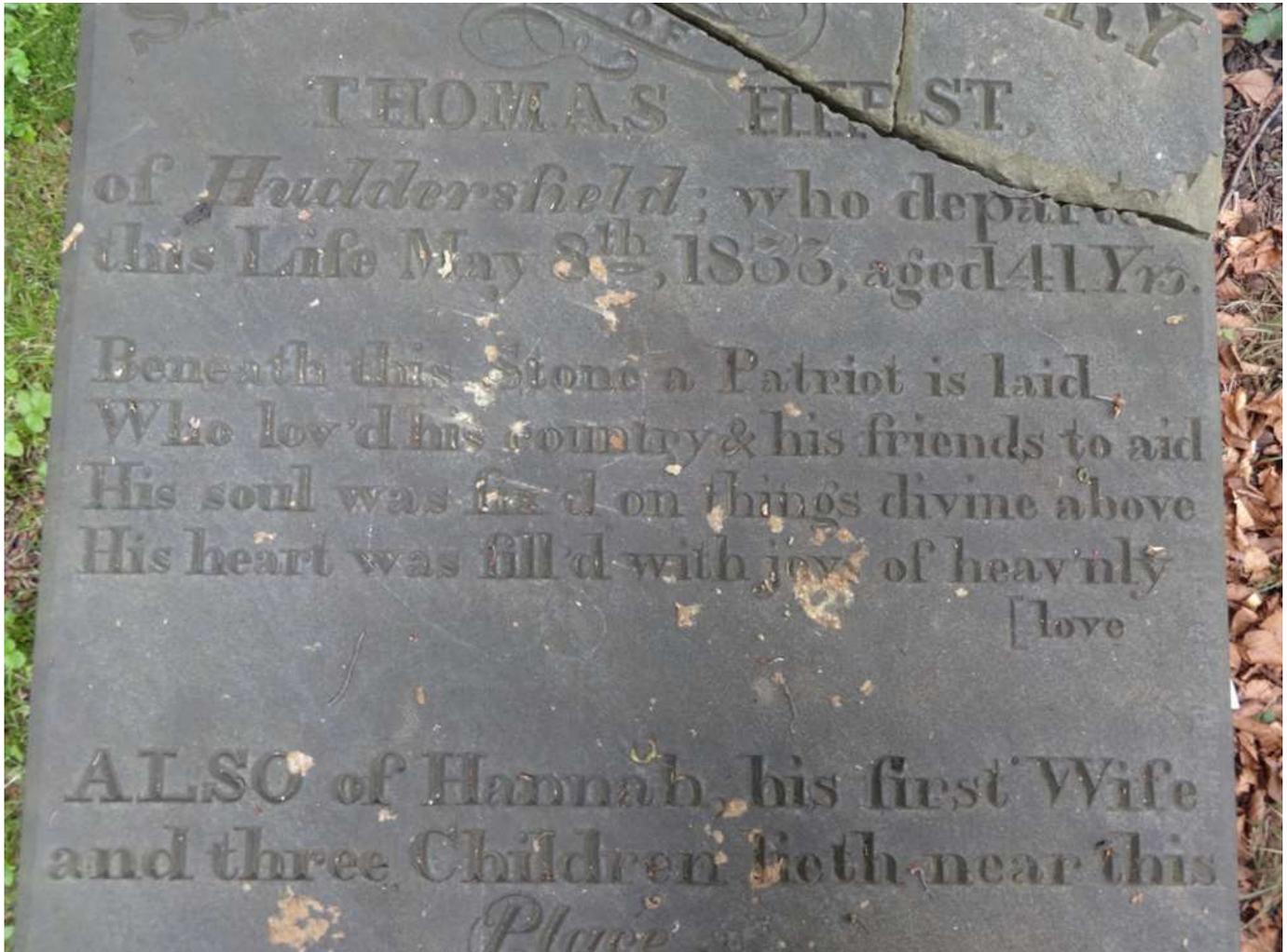
There is probably much truth in the claim that it was such exertions to promote the cause of co-operation which contributed to his early death. Sadly Thomas Hirst was no longer able to participate in the work to which he dedicated his life when in April 1833 preparations were being made to hold the Fifth Cooperative Congress in his home-town. Instead he lay on his death bed, according to the press as a result of illness *'probably caused chiefly if not entirely by his over strenuous exertions in the cause...'*

Thousands gathered at the funeral of Thomas Hirst, held at Holy Trinity on Sunday 13 May 1833, including members of the Co-operative Societies, trades unions and other working class organisations. *'The sight of so many men attending to his last home this popular orator proves the esteem entertained by his own class for him.'* acknowledged the Halifax Guardian.

On his tombstone at Trinity Church was inscribed the verse:

*Beneath this Stone a Patriot is Laid
Who loved his country and his friends to aid,
His soul was fixed on things divine above,
His heart was fill'd with joys of heavenly Love.*

It is the stone on which this verse is inscribed which needs repair and some replacement.



Thomas Hirst's damaged gravestone.

A new section of matching stone will replace the cracked and missing section and the whole piece will be skimmed so the new and existing stone weather evenly.

The present day Co-op has requested permission to restore the stone and it will be taken away for some months for the skilled work to be done. All the carving work will be done by hand and once completed should be as good as new.

Nearly 200 years later from Thomas Hirst, the co-operative movement continues to promote the benefits of ethical trade, community-action, shared-ownership and co-operation. The Co-operative Group has recently restructured its business and revisited its operating principals and purposes. I for one value its continued commitment to Fair Trade and 'not-for-profit' trading and am pleased that the Marsh Co-op store continues to provide good services to the people of our parish and beyond.



The original Marsh Co-op.

Holy Trinity should be proud to be the final resting place of this forgotten hero and I hope that the restoration of the gravestone this year will lead to a growing partnership with the co-op in the years to come.

Andy Barber
February '18

[With thanks to David Collingwood at Co-op Funeralcare and <https://undergroundhistories.wordpress.com/author/huddsludds/> for the historical research contained in this month's blog, much of which is copied verbatim]