



Information for teachers Religion in County Durham

The Catholic faith

The turn of the 19th century witnessed a re-awakening of Catholicism. After centuries of suppression, the Restoration Act of 1829 enabled Catholics to worship freely. Within a relatively short time, Catholicism developed from being the faith of a very small minority group to a religious force which played a significant role in the expanding industrial climate of the Durham region.

By the end of the 1840s, Irish immigration caused by the potato famine was beginning to have an impact upon the Catholic community of North East England. Most immigrants headed for the farms, industrial towns such as Tow Law and Consett, or mines surrounding Durham city in search of work. The Church embarked upon a school and church building programme to meet their needs.

The thirty year period from 1850 – 1880 experienced a huge influx of immigrants to North East England, with many being Irish Catholics.

In 1876 it was estimated that there were 121,000 Catholics in the district, an increase of 51,000 in twenty five years. Their integration was not always smooth, with reports from Darlington of serious social unrest and families of 10 people sharing one room along with their livestock.

In general, however, the Irish were accepted into communities in North East England with little difficulty. There was plenty of work in the area, with little competition for jobs, whilst working practices in the mines made men dependent on each other, regardless of their background.





Methodism in North East England

John Wesley first came to preach in the area in 1743. Converts from his visits met to worship in each other's homes, building chapels as they grew and raised money. Different branches of Methodism developed including the Wesleyan Methodists and the Primitive Methodists. The Primitive Methodists tended to be freer in their forms of worship, more radical in their politics and closer to the working people.

The chapels were run by committees, with preachers travelling around different chapels to preach. Methodism was very popular with the working classes in the mining villages. Many found the warmth of fellowship along with the educational advantages of its Sunday Schools very attractive. During the 19th century it was the Wesleyan Methodists who provided most schools for the working classes.

They believed in 'an education which may begin in the infant school, and end in heaven'. Increasingly Methodism gained support from the middle classes who admired its puritanical emphasis.

The Anglican Church

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Anglican Church had the second largest number of followers in County Durham. The number of parishes and clergy was small however in comparison to the size of the population and the number of Methodist chapels. New colliery villages, built around the mines, could be ten miles from a parish church.

Until 1843, a new parish could not be created without an Act of Parliament. After 1843 it was made easier and cheaper to establish a new parish and in the 1850s and 60s, new churches were built in or near the new communities. The Methodist chapels were much more numerous however and in 1851, there were 169 Anglican places of worship compared to 351 Methodist chapels. In general, it was the Methodist faith that was more in touch with the mining families of County Durham than the Anglican Church.