

THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

One of the first circuit appointments made in 1899 was that of Temperance Secretary. This cause was prominent in the circuit for nearly sixty years and reviewed at every circuit meeting. In 1903 the meeting "rejoiced in the move by some licensing Benches to reduce the sale of intoxicating liquors and securing a more vigorous administration of the laws" A copy of this resolution was sent to the Prime Minister and the local M.P.

Schedules of membership of temperance groups in the circuit were prepared and forwarded annually. In 1915 the membership of such groups (the Band of Hope a popular one), though fluctuating, was reported as 774, an increase of 119 on the preceding year. In 1911 the circuit joined with others in a public protest against the granting of a license for the sale of liquor during two days of Coronation festivities in Sutton Park, and in 1914 the Watch Committee was urged to order public houses to close earlier following the setting-up of soldiers' training camps locally. During the first world war and afterwards the quarterly meeting urged the government several times to restrict the manufacture of alcoholic drink in view of the serious shortage of food. It was the practice to send copies of these resolutions to the Prime Minister and other prominent officials.

During the second world war the circuit urged "the abolition of treating to intoxicants for the duration"- surely without little thought as to how this was to be achieved- later condemning the "apalling drunkenness in public air raid shelters" and the Ministry of Food for allowing "the diversion of valuable foodstuffs to brewers and distillers". But the changing society of the post-war years saw a gradual dimunition of temperance activity and it became the concern only of a few committed individuals. One of the last Temperance Sundays occurred in 1957.

During the Anglican-Methodist talks of the 60's the subjects of alcohol, gambling and divorce were prominent on the agenda; the use of fermented wine in Communion services, although a minor question among the serious theological issues, received much publicity.

The prohibition on the use of alcohol on Methodist premises remains. The restrictions applying

to ministers in their homes were relaxed in the 70's. And in 1987 a questionnaire on under-age drinking produced no replies from local churches. Moderation became the keynote on this long-standing issue; the potential income from the wedding receptions that are not held on church premises is missed, but so are the problems that might be associated with them.

The concern of the quarterly meeting was not confined to the local issues. The meeting passed a resolution in 1911 "rejoicing in the welcome given by Sir Edward Grey to the proposal by President Taft for unlimited arbitration between this country and the U.S.A., believing this to be a Christian course to preserve peace." Not a matter, one might think, to disturb the average member of the circuit. The Birmingham justices were advised in 1915 of "the great evil of coin machines" while in 1918 the far-sighted meeting urged H.M. government "to establish a Health Ministry for the saving of infant life and for the improvement of public health". At the same meeting the new Education Bill was welcomed, but the Minister for Education was urged to introduce a clause making it impossible for children to be employed on Sundays. And to round off what must have been a very full agenda a resolution was sent to the Prime Minister and others expressing "profound regret at the opening of disorderly houses for British soldiers" near their camps in France.

In 1923 the circuit advised the Government that the forthcoming British Empire Exhibition should not open on Sundays, and in 1928 the growing popularity of greyhound racing and hospital sweepstakes were subjects of concern. The first joint meeting after the Methodist unity celebrations in 1932 protested about the Sunday opening of cinemas.

The "growing menace of the unrestricted sale of contraceptives" was thankfully seen to be curbed by the Contraceptives Bill of 1938, a year in which the Football League was congratulated on its action in refusing five thousand pounds from the Pools Promoters Association. In Erdington the appearance of all-in wrestling on Sundays was condemned. The influx of refugees at the time led to a resolution urging members to show them every Christian charity. In 1942 the meeting noticed with concern "the widespread ignorance

of Christian teaching" and urged Conference to press for competent religious teaching in schools. After the war in 1949 there was a lengthy discussion on the plight of students from abroad "being met by communists and returning to their own countries agnostics and communists too".

But in the ensuing years a number of factors led to the diminution of the crusading spirit. The establishment of a Christian Citizenship Department at Westminster in 1961 and the Social Responsibility committees of 1969 no doubt deflected social concerns from being the sole preserve of the quarterly meeting. The Anglican-Methodist talks began to take up the meeting's time together with the then promising developments in Castle Vale. In the 80's the increasing unemployment figures and "the regrettable lowering of standards in television and radio" were discussed but no advice was directly given to Her Majesty's Government. Many members of the circuit did, however, join in a protest during the Summit meeting of heads of state in Birmingham in 1988, urging the cancellation of third world debt, said to be crippling some countries.

Representations to Ministers of State have been taken over by connexional organisations and the Prime Minister no longer receives letters from the Sutton Park circuit.