

HISTORY SOCIETY NOTES, NO.3 - THE SOCIETY OF DEPENDANTS - THE COKELERS, AT LORD'S HILL, SHAMLEY GREEN. An Introduction, by Patrick Mannix/Marion May.

In 1850, a London shoemaker, by name John Sirgood, originally from Avening in Gloucestershire, came to live at Loxwood, a small village in the parish of Wisborough. Soon after his arrival there started a little religious clique of four or five persons, who met together in his cottage every Sunday and probably on certain week days as well, to hold a service of their own under the guidance of Sirgood.

The congregation soon began to increase, attracted by Sirgood's undoubted ability as a preacher and also by the novelty of a rival to the parish church. They called themselves the Society of Dependants; but also became known as the Cokelers. There is no authoritative explanation of the origin of the latter name. There were a number of communities in Surrey and Sussex, one was established in Lord's Hill, Shamley Green in 1855. The name Lord's Hill pre-dates this event.

At Lord's Hill they established a chapel in the 1860s at what is now incorrectly labeled "Cooklers" on the map of Lord's Hill and later a shop at what is now Lord's Hill House. Several houses were built for and by Dependants named after villages in Gloucestershire associated with Sirgood, including Dursley and Avening.



The shop was a significant aspect of the Cokeler's community and in turn became a significant feature of the wider population. They were farm workers and by setting up their own store, joint property of the local members of the sect, to sell their produce they were able to cut out the middleman. The stores expanded to supply products needed by the community. It is probable that Sirgood, who had socialistic tendencies, favoured the setting up of stores which could render his flock commercially self-sufficient. To traditional landowners this was potentially subversive and initially resulted in opposition to the Cokelers.

The religious creed of the Cokelers was built up upon a number texts, taken out of their context, and thus rendered capable of any interpretation they may put on them. The reading and committal to memory of large portions of scripture formed a considerable part of their service, at the end of which each member in turn, as the Spirit moved him, would get up and preach. They

differed from almost every other Christian sect, in that they did not use the Lord's Prayer, asserting that the Lord's Prayer was given merely as a model for other prayers, and that its very brevity proved its unadaptability for use.



Abstinence from alcohol was strongly encouraged. On the subject of marriage they entertained peculiar views. They had no marriage service, and, while recognising the necessity of marriage generally, they did not encourage their members to marry. The position taken up by the elders was that while marriage was a thing to be, if possible, avoided and an evil, any infringement of the laws of morality was a far graver evil. In their opinion both man and woman are the better for remaining single, and that those who wish to lead a higher life should not need such earthly institutions as marriage. In practice, however, the sect did not follow their own tenets; indeed, if they had, it is difficult to see how they would survive in the course of time. [They did not. PAVM]

Additional documents:

The Story of the Dependants, by Marion May, 1987, rev. 2003

The Cokelers a Sussex Sect, by Earl Winterton, September 1904

The Society or Dependants or Cokelers, Wikipedia