1
Inventing the Parish Magazine

Origins

Religious tracts
In a sense the parish magazine was born during the Reformation, when Martin Luther’s emphasis on Biblicism encouraged the spread of reading. In the centuries that followed, the Bible and approved religious works continued to be central to Protestantism and were utilised and adapted by British evangelicals to spread God’s word to the poor and the heathen through charities such as the Religious Tract Society (RTS), the British and Foreign Bible Society and the SPCK. In 1804 the RTS printed 314,000 tracts; by 1861 it published 20 million annually, together with 13 million copies of religious periodicals (which were in effect ‘serial tracts’). As Richard Altick memorably recorded in his groundbreaking work on the history of reading and readers:

Tracts were flung from carriage windows; they were passed out at railway stations; they turned up in jails and lodging houses and hospitals and workhouses...they were distributed in huge quantities at Sunday and day schools...they were a ubiquitous part of the social landscape.

Hannah More’s Cheap Repository of Moral and Religious Tracts was a collection of moral tales published in 1795, partly to maintain control of the poor because of fear of French republicanism and the popularity of the works of Thomas Paine, but More was equally concerned with a perceived lack of suitable reading material for the newly literate graduates of Sunday and charity schools. Greater literacy among the poor had led to increased publication of cheap chapbooks, most of which

J. Platt, Subscribing to Faith? The Anglican Parish Magazine 1859–1929
© Jane Platt 2015
were secular and often irreverent. More's tracts were printed to look like chapbooks so that good literature would triumph over bad in the war against what churchgoers universally termed ‘pernicious’ publications.6

The parish magazine was placed squarely in the tradition of Hannah More and the tract societies in an advertisement of 1875 which claimed that each number was equal in content to ‘three ordinary penny tracts’.7 As late as 1914, an article in the inset, *Home Words*, argued that the magazine ‘more than fulfils the purpose of the old-fashioned tracts’, and would be read ‘where they were thrown aside’.8

**Tract distribution and the district visitor**

The tract societies combined local volunteers and paid regional colporteurs to distribute religious literature. Clergymen maintained stocks in parish libraries, lending them to parishioners, as explained by this country vicar in 1858:

> A parochial library has been established...consisting principally of books and tracts from the Tract Society and the inhabitants... supplied gratis...I have been in the habit for ten years of taking them two or three times in the year and some years oftener to their houses, and changing them when read. The books and tracts have been generally read.9

Tract distribution became a crusade. In her thesis on Victorian tract societies Sheila Haines remarks that the Church, as protector of the nation’s spiritual and moral welfare, thought of the poor as lambs in continual danger from ‘ravening wolves’.10 This was a common contemporary metaphor; at the 1861 Church Congress, one speaker, noting that in some localities only two per cent of the ‘mechanics or working population’ attended any church, spoke of the difficulties ‘in penetrating the recesses of the wilderness into which the wandering sheep have strayed’. He recommended creating a volunteer force of laity to work with the clergy, subdividing the parishes into districts and systematically visiting the people, leaving ‘printed letters’ which invited them to church. The Church, he said, should go out to find the people, to impress upon them its sincerity.11

The concept of district visiting was not new, having been introduced by the Church of Scotland minister, Thomas Chalmers, in a poor Glasgow parish in 1814. A method of reproducing the neighbourhood ties of the country parish, among widespread fears of religious decline in cities, it was widely imitated.12 In the mid-nineteenth century, the