

## MOBILE CHURCH

Whilst transcribing the 1901 Census of High Littleton and Hallatrow, which was taken on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> March, I was impressed by the diligence of the enumerator who, unlike his predecessors in earlier years, had listed all the uninhabited structures such as the Church, School, Methodist Chapel and Railway Station. Immediately before the G.W. Railway Station he had recorded "COE Mission Carriage". At first sight this may have seemed a rather bizarre entry but in fact the enumerator had "captured" the mobile church in a siding at Hallatrow Station.

The Church Missionary Society had been established more than a hundred years previously and over the years despatched worthy people to spread the word in some of the more backward countries of the world. By the end of the nineteenth century the Church of England was getting concerned about falling church attendances at home, in particular in places such as the Somerset Coalfields, where some miners only troubled the vicar when they wanted to marry, have the odd child baptised or bury a loved one.

Some inspired person then decreed that, if the people wouldn't come to the church, the church would go to the people. Accordingly the inside of a railway carriage was equipped with a lectern, chairs, oil lamps and curtains, to make it suitable for holding religious services and off it went, suitably staffed, to whatever outlying places the railway went. The carriage would then be uncoupled and stay at the station for a day or two, while the local heathens were rounded up or otherwise persuaded to come and worship.

The mission carriage frequently passed through Hallatrow, which was an important junction, and stopped there on occasions for business, when it was Hallatrow's turn on the rota. We are fortunate that Samuel Loxton, who made a number of sketches of High Littleton and Hallatrow scenes before the first World War, was sufficiently inspired by the Mission carriage to make a sketch of it for posterity.

The diligent Census enumerator, who recorded the visit of the mission carriage, was 21 year old Charles Body, who lived with his father at Church Farm, High Littleton and was a colliery clerk, almost certainly at Greyfield. The parish had in the past been enumerated as two districts yet Charles Body did the whole lot himself. Surprisingly the population of the parish in 1901 at 812 was only one more than it was in 1801. In the same 100 year period the population of England and Wales had quadrupled.

Michael L. Browning