

THE GRIFFYDAM LOVE FEAST by Michael Green



Fresco showing early Christian meal

The Love Feast had its origins in the common meals shared in fellowship by the early Christians where the hungry were also fed. Often the meal also contained sacramental elements. Gradually the two separated and became celebrated as the Love Feast and Holy Communion. The former slowly disappeared but was resurrected again in the early 18th century principally by the Moravians who still celebrate it today.

The Moravians had a strong influence on John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and it was while attending a Moravian meeting in Aldersgate Street London that he felt his heart “strangely warmed”. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Love Feast became an established feature of Methodism from its very beginnings and it would have been held at Griffydam from the forming of the Methodist society there in the early 1760s. Until the chapel opened in 1778, it would have taken place in followers’ homes.

The meal was now symbolic. The key elements of the Love Feast were the singing of hymns, extemporary prayers, distribution of the bread or cake by stewards to the members of the congregation sitting on benches or pews, a collection for the poor, passing round of water in the loving cup with its two handles and the giving of testimonies.

Opening the Love Feast for many years, would have been the singing of *Come and let us sweetly join Christ to praise in hymns divine* specially written by Charles Wesley for it. There was no set order for the service which was based on spontaneity. It was often highly charged and there would be conversions. Revivals would be started and continued at them. They were very popular and admission was often on production of a current class ticket which was a certificate of Membership of the Methodist Church. This was strictly enforced.



Distributing bread during a Moravian Love Feast today

Towards the end of the 19th century the Love Feast started to go out of favour and by the beginning of the 20th it had all but disappeared from the Preaching Plan. One feature though was carried over to the Holy Communion service and this was the collection for the Poor (now Benevolence) Fund.

The Griffydam Love Feast was an annual event held on Easter Monday and the first written account of it is found in a letter of 25th April 1821 from William Kidger, a Griffydam class leader, to his daughter and son in law, Mr and Mrs Tucker, which began “I hereby give you an account of our memorable Love Feast. It commenced at two o’ clock and we left the

chapel with some difficulty at half past five. Had there been time, I doubt not but that scores, if not hundreds more, would have declared what the Lord had done for them.



Methodist loving cup c 1840

In 1856 it was felt that the time allotted for the Love Feast was too short and a proposal was made that it should start at 1.00 instead of 2.00 pm which prompted an amendment that it should start at 11.00 am!

Around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century accounts of the Griffydam Love Feast often appeared in local newspapers. The following is an extract from that appearing in the Burton Chronicle of April 11th 1901.

On Easter Monday the annual circuit Love Feast was held at Griffydam. Early in the day the usually quiet village was alive with vehicles of various kinds, and large numbers of visitors thronged the place, some having come from Leicester and Derby to take part in the annual gathering. At 1.30 the service was held in the chapel, presided over by the superintendent minister. The building was packed, and a time of great blessing was spent, many stood bearing testimony to the saving and keeping power of Christ whilst the emblems of the feast were being distributed. Stirring hymns were sung, and the proceedings were marked by intense earnestness and enthusiasm.

Exceptionally, Griffydam's Love Feast continued well into the 20th century. It is said that first on his feet would always be member and local preacher, John Johnson, father of the much-loved teacher, Florrie Johnson. The late Sid Haywood recounted how the whole village later became involved by providing hospitality following the Love Feast in the form of food for those attending and how the length of the service had now become much shorter commencing at 2.30 pm and finishing around 4.00 pm. An evening service followed at 6.00 pm conducted by the minister.

Its Love feast was held continuously for almost 200 years until around the late 1950s when it ceased due to a reduction in the numbers of those attending. This is surpassed, however, by the Methodist one held on the first Sunday in July in the barn at Alport in the Derbyshire Dales started in the 1760s and still held even this year via Zoom in view of the Covid pandemic.