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Ilkley: In the Footsteps of Rudolf Steiner

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Rudolf Steiner presented the Ilkley Conference on Waldorf Education at Ilkley from the 4th-18th August, 1923.

Rudolf Steiner promised his audience: “I shall try to show what Anthroposophy has to say on the subject of education and describe the attempt already made in the Waldorf School at Stuttgart to apply the educational principles arising out of Anthroposophy” (Steiner, 1928, p.29).

In the first of thirteen lectures, Rudolf Steiner told his audience: “We have gathered together in a beautiful spot in the North of England ... You have given up your summer recreation ... I cannot adequately express my gratitude for the fact that you have dedicated your holidays to the study of ideas for the good of the future” (Steiner, 1928, p.32).



Figure 1. Rudolf Steiner stayed at Hillside on the edge of Ilkley Moor (photo: J Paull).

With Emil Molt, Rudolf Steiner founded the original Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1919 (Paull & Hennig, 2020). It was conceived as a demonstration school, a proof of concept. Rudolf Steiner was keen to propagate his educational initiative in the Anglo-world. In his first post-war trip to Britain, in April 1922, at Stratford-upon-Avon, Steiner introduced an Anglo audience to his novel education ideas (Paull, 2013). Just months later, in August 1922, at the Oxford Conference, he elaborated these ideas (Paull, 2011).

A year after the Oxford Conference, Rudolf Steiner returned to Britain to progress the Waldorf project: “The Ilkley conference is being arranged in order to give parents, teachers and educationists further opportunity for studying this new educational impulse that can be worked out anywhere, in a manner suited to the peculiar needs of any special country or district” (Ilkley Gazette, 1923b, p.5).



Figure 2. Cow and Calf Rocks on Ilkley Moor (photo: J Paull).

In private correspondence, Rudolf Steiner confided: “Ilkley is a sort of health resort for northern English industrialists ... The area is not particularly attractive” (Steiner & Maryon, 1990, letter 11 August 1923, p.135). The halcyon days of Ilkley as a centre for hydrotherapy and ‘water cures’, dating especially from the 1840s (Dixon, 2002), were

now expired, perhaps as the realisation that there may be less onerous and more effective health options, other than dunkings in cold-water baths in Yorkshire.

“Ilkley is ... a town synonymous with the north: romantic, dourly rugged moors, stout Victorian architecture, rain, dark, mossy handsomeness” (Dyckhoff, 2010, p.103). Rudolf Steiner stayed at Hillside (Fig.1) on the outskirts of the village. Hillside offers direct pedestrian access to the Ilkley Moor and to a pathway to White Wells Spa on the Moor. Steiner wrote that “Ilkley ... in remnants of dolmens and ancient Druid altars lying around, it really still has everywhere traces reminding one of ancient spirituality” (in Villeneuve, 2004, p.879).

The Yorkshire Observer stated: “It is the quiet and peaceful charm of the countryside and the delightful solitudes of its moors which makes the lure of Ilkley so acceptable to the seeker of health and pleasure, and these moors, with the heather breaking into purple on the crest, are now to be seen in their fullest beauty” (1923b) (Fig.2). The weather for the Conference was “cold and wet” (Steiner & Maryon, 1990, p.138) and unseasonably bad for the duration (Villeneuve, 2004).



Figure 3. Rudolf Steiner lectures were presented at the Congregational Hall, Ilkley (now Riddings Hall) (photo: Google Maps).

At the Ilkley Conference there were about 150 attendees of 16 different nationalities (Leeds Mercury, 1923). Steiner's lectures were held in the Congregational Hall (now Riddings Hall) (Fig.3). Steiner reported that the "the audience are very attentive, but there are only a few men" (Steiner & Maryon, 1990, 11 August, p.134). Lectures were in German, with George Kaufmann translating.

The local newspaper reported: "The conference at Ilkley, organised by the Educational Union for the Realisation of Spiritual Values ... has been marked by a series of lectures by Dr Rudolf Steiner ... and by evening discussions on various educational subjects in which teachers from the Waldorf School have explained the methods employed in that school. These discussions have been of exceptional practical interest, and, in addition to members of the conference, they have been attended by a number of local people to whom the special subject appealed. One of the aims of the union is to try and get these methods introduced to some of the English schools, and already the Priory School at King's Langley, Herts., has introduced them with considerable success" (Ilkley Gazette, 1923a, p.5).



Figure 4. Eurythmy performances were presented at King's Hall, Ilkley (photo: J Paull; from the dais).

Six teachers from the Waldorf School presented lectures; they included Dr Caroline von Heydebrand (history), Dr Hermann von Baravalle (maths), Dr Erich Schwebsch (music), and Fräulein Julie Laemmert (singing) (reported as ‘Lemmat’), and an unnamed “lady teacher of eurhythmmy” (Frau Elisabeth Baumann) (Esterl, 2006; Yorkshire Observer, 1923c). A eurhythmmy performance by children of the Priory School and two performances by the Dornach eurythmists were presented in King’s Hall (Fig.4).

An exhibition of handicraft works of Stuttgart students was presented of “various paintings, modelling, and toys and other handwork which had been made by the children” (15 August) (Yorkshire Observer, 1923a). Rudolf Steiner delivered an evening lecture at the Teacher Training College at Bingley (10 August), 16 km (10 miles) from Ilkley across Ilkley Moor (Fig.5).



Figure 5. Rudolf Steiner delivered one lecture at the nearby Teacher Training College at Bingley (photo: Google Maps).

Rudolf Steiner was a consummate presenter and his Ilkley audience were clueless that he was personally grappling with issues, large and small. A delay on the Continent meant that he had to skip a rendezvous in London to collect his supply of snuff - so, from Ilkley he mail ordered it (from Salmon & Gluckstein, Tobacconists, Edgware Rd, London) (Villeneuve, 2004). Days before Ilkley, he privately lamented: “The state of the [Anthroposophy] Society is incredibly terrible. The impossibilities come from every corner” (Steiner & Maryon, 1990, 1 August, p.126). Steiner was further burdened by the

incineration of the Goetheanum on 1 January, 1923 and the challenges of rebuilding and recovery (Paull, 2020).

The reports of the Waldorf School presented at Ilkley were glowing. Yet, even in the same issue of 'Anthroposophy' in which Rudolf Steiner reported that "on August the 4th, I reached England" (Steiner, 1923, p.141), there appeared an "Urgent Appeal": "As a consequence of the catastrophes in Germany, which of late have been increasing disastrously, the Waldorf School is at present in dire peril. The financial position of the school is such that it has only sufficient means to enable it to hold out a few weeks longer" (Anthroposophy, 1923, p.154).

To an Ilkley audience, George Kaufmann reported that: "Dr Steiner, an Austrian by birth, is now in his 63rd year, and possesses unusual health, energy and freshness for his age" (1923). Unbeknown to all, just a few months hence, Rudolf Steiner's health would be shattered, never to be restored.

The aspiration of the Ilkley Conference was that: "as a result of the conference it is hoped to start in this country a school on the lines of the Waldorf School" (Ilkley Gazette, 1923c, p.5). One report stated boldly: "a day school on the lines of the Waldorf School is to be founded in England next year" (Yorkshire Post, 1923). Michael Hall School, now at Forest Row, (originally The New School), was founded in 1925 (Masters, Sheen, & Mansfield, 2014).

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