Saints of the British Mission: The life of Catherine Horner

by Dr James Perry

“There is something contagious about her smile, something cheerful about her attitude; she has learned the secret of being happy.”

GORDON B. HINCKLEY
Throughout her life, Catherine Horner presented herself and acted as a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. Born on 9 August 1907 to Thomas and Emily Horner, in Wollaston, near Stourbridge in Worcestershire, Catherine was one of eight children, of whom six reached adulthood. The first link between the Horner family and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was set with the baptism of Catherine's mother, Emily, on 10 April 1904. Thanks to Catherine's efforts, there is a detailed record of Emily's conversion, which involved a dream that occurred almost a month before meeting a missionary. Catherine's father, Thomas, shortly thereafter followed Emily's example and was baptised on 19 June 1904, with other family members joining over time. As a consequence of her parents' conversion, Catherine was raised as a member of the Church and fully engaged in its programmes. As a young girl during a particularly bitter and icy winter, Catherine begged her parents to allow her to attend church meetings, such was her faith and devotion. Gordon B. Hinckley highlighted Catherine's development over the years:

Her entire growth has been a fight with fear. The victory won may be realized by looking back into the years, when a pale, little spindle-legged girl shyly took a back seat in Kidderminster Branch, and comparing that picture with a scene in Brixton when a determined young woman held a large open-air crowd in rapt attention. In her childhood she avoided playmates because of fear, a terrible shyness that made her feel ashamed of herself.

Inspired by the refining influences of Mormonism she has stubbornly put down that fear by discovering and cultivating talents which once seemed absent. In Birmingham she forced herself to enter a public-speaking competition. Frightened and shaking, with a prayer in her heart, she stood on her feet. Though she burst into tears when she finished, that effort was rewarded with her victory over her fellow contestants. It has been her fight against fear, with prayer and determination, that has made her a happy young woman.[1]

Catherine's abilities and interests were broad and inclusive of the arts. Two poems were submitted to the 1930 centenary celebrations of the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[2] By 1932, Catherine had moved to London and was a member of the South London Branch. It was during this time that she won a poetry competition between the London and Birmingham districts. The winning piece was entitled “Nature Speaks”, a poem that communicates that God lives and that He can be found in the world around us.[3]
When examined, it is apparent that there is consistency to Catherine’s life – with her firm faith she remained firmly engaged and committed to the Church despite the hardships and difficulties that her family experienced. Due to a fluctuating local membership and with branches being formed and closed, Catherine’s family attended various congregations including Stourbridge and Handsworth. In these settings, the Horner family worked tirelessly in Church service and sought to better their circumstances.

During this time, when the Church was much smaller, Catherine could be found at the heart of activity and leadership. On 13 April 1934, she became President of Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association (YLMIA), for which she was ideally suited on account of her service as British Mission Hive Beekeeper. In 1935, Catherine was one of the leaders behind the organisation of the British Mission’s first Mutual Improvement Association (MIA) conference in Kidderminster, with around 500 members in attendance. As Young Women’s President for MIA in the British Isles, Catherine was instrumental in the planning and running of the event, which was attended by future Latter-day Saint leaders, including Gordon B. Hinckley.

Catherine Horner, middle row, far left. Photograph taken by Claudius Stevenson at the British Mission MIA Conference, held at Kidderminster in 1935
The centenary celebrations of 1937, which commemorated the hundred-year anniversary of the arrival of Latter-day Saint missionaries in England, were a time of personal satisfaction and celebration for Catherine. Her poem, “To President Heber J. Grant”, won the centenary prize and Catherine had the opportunity of reading it to him.[9] Catherine's participation in the arts was matched by her interest in the humanities and historical research. However, it was somewhat of a miracle for Catherine that she was even able to attend.

I had been ill and out of work for almost six months and when I finally returned to London, I decided to fit myself for a different occupation. Inasmuch as I had no money of my own, it was necessary for me to get a job doing housework -- the work to which I was accustomed -- that I might be able to keep myself and attend Pitman's College at night. At first, I went to work for an elderly couple. Three months later I went to work for the missionaries who were living at 5 Gordon Square in London. By the time I had paid for my room, the school fees, and my tithing, I usually had little left. This went on for 12 months, yet I never wanted for anything. My own family could not help me, but I found a friend who helped me in many ways -- bought me clothing and saw that I was not in need. That year the MIA Convention was to be held at Rochdale and, of course, I had no money, but I knew that inasmuch as I had paid my tithing, the Lord would open a way for me to go. Sure enough, when the time came my friend sent me the money for my fare and the missionaries in the office all put together and gave me the money for my lodgings.[10]

Not only did Catherine attend the conference, she won the centenary prize and was able to meet President Heber J Grant.

The following year, in 1938, Catherine was approached and asked to work for the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) and to assist American members in completing their genealogical research.[11] Consequently, Catherine moved to 74 St James Road, London, where she undertook training in genealogy and began conducting searches for North Americans, all the while attending Church meetings and participating in activities. Catherine described the experience of beginning work in genealogy as follows:

I had tried for several years to find my father's birthplace. My father told me that his father had died at the age of 46 when Dad was just four years old, so he did not know a great deal about him. However, my grandmother had told Dad that her husband came from Braintree in Essex. I searched the 1851 Census of
Braintree and surrounding parishes but could find no Horner names. About six months after starting to work for Brother Mount, who was a genealogist, while searching the 1851 Census of Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire, I found my grandfather and his sister and mother. From the information in the census, I found that he was born at Great Sampford, Essex. Subsequently, when visiting Great Sampford and Hempstead Parishes, I was able to obtain a great deal of my ancestry. Before this I had tried and prayed for 10 years to get information on my father’s family. It was not until I did the work for someone else that I was able to obtain my own.[12]
These early experiences shaped Catherine and enabled her to gain a strong testimony of the importance of family history.

During February 1940, after two years of training and working as a genealogist, Catherine made the move to Edinburgh, at the request of a senior church leader and the GSU. As was noted in the organisation’s magazine: “Miss Catherine L. M. Horner has been sent to Edinburgh by our Society and the British Mission to search out records for numerous families, and patrons have received more for their money than at any previous period.”[13] The ability to have a trained researcher on hand to complete genealogical research at an affordable price meant many more families could stretch their family trees further back. Her appointment to Scotland led Catherine to becoming a British Mission Genealogical Supervisor.[14]
Despite the captivating and time-consuming nature of her work, Catherine remained fully invested in church service. In addition to her congregational duties, Catherine undertook speaking assignments in branches and districts around the country.\textsuperscript{[15]} Catherine’s activities, however, extended far beyond what she was required to do for her church responsibilities. For church publications, such as the \textit{Millennial Star}, she wrote historical summaries of religious figures and wrote faith-strengthening articles.\textsuperscript{[16]} Catherine was also present and involved in the many varied Branch activities.\textsuperscript{[17]} Exhortations to keep records were made by Catherine and her personal actions to do so typify her commitment to do the right thing. In every way, Catherine was a leader and inspiration to others.

One of Catherine’s defining attributes was her fixed determination to make the world a better place. On 5 December 1942, a Relief Society bazaar was held in Edinburgh, under the direction of Catherine. £20 was raised for the Red Cross, which was recognised by the organisation.\textsuperscript{[20]} With a forward-thinking approach, the event was organised in the lead up to Christmas, to better capitalise on individuals using the event as an opportunity to purchase Christmas presents. A letter from the British Red
Cross was published in the *Millennial Star* thanking Catherine for all of her efforts in raising the funds.[21]

A few years later, one day in the spring of 1945, a reporter found Catherine sat in a bedroom of Borthwick Castle, which had famously been inhabited by Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. During the war, the castle was used to store important Scottish records dating from hundreds of years earlier. On a daily basis, Catherine made her way from her home at 48 London Street, Edinburgh, and travelled to the castle to find the ancestors of members of the Church in Utah. While working in England, Catherine charged between five shillings and ten pounds as she travelled to various parishes and institutions locating records. However, in Scotland it was far more efficient, due to the records being held centrally at Borthwick.[22] Searching through records from the 1500s to 1854, Catherine was able to access records that would have been impossible for most other members.
At that time, Catherine estimated that she had found the ancestors for more than 1,000 American members of the Church, which meant the number of persons found and for whom Temple ordinances were performed, were multiplied many hundreds if not thousands of times.[23] Of her job Catherine declared, “I like my work very much. I have great satisfaction in knowing that the people I trace are being baptised into the Mormon faith.”[24] As ever, Catherine’s motivations were driven by a full understanding of the gospel and its eternal nature.
Despite the seriousness of the work, genealogists recognise that humour can be found in the most unlikely of places when searching historical records or undertaking research. In 1969, at the age of 62, Catherine wrote an article for *The Improvement Era*, where she catalogued a number of the witty, humorous, and strange finds she had made over the years.[25] For example:

Married at Marown after a tedious courtship of 9 days, Thos. Collister of the Hew, Rushen, a sporting widower of 60 to Mrs. Ann Lewin, a bouncing widow of 50 of Marown. Five weeks have scarcely escaped since the bridegroom buried his former rib.

Of this and other finds Catherine declared, “In reading this, you find tension in your work truly easing. For me, such genealogical entries are wonderful tension relaxers.”[26]

Although moving to Edinburgh had taken Catherine far from home, she remained close to her family. In 1947, following her mother's death, Catherine made the decision to emigrate. On 4 December 1947, Catherine set sail for the United States of America from Southampton and arrived in New York on 10 December 1947.[27] Her stated occupation on her entry documents was genealogist. Just one month later, on 4 January 1948, now settled in Salt Lake City in the Capitol Hill area, Catherine undertook her temple ordinances and was endowed. The next year, in June 1949, Catherine was able to be sealed to her parents, both of whom had been unable to make their temple covenants before they died. After arriving in Utah, Catherine continued to be involved in genealogical research and in teaching others how to do their family history.[28] In addition, Catherine undertook her undergraduate studies at the University of Utah with a major in Latin, graduating in 1957. Her research efforts were generally appreciated by those she aided. As Kenneth Bullock noted:

I desire to express appreciation for the early research efforts in Scotland on the Bullock ancestry by Miss Catherine L.M. Horner; and in later years her continued research as a member of the Genealogical Society [sic] at Salt Lake City, Utah.[29]

As a result of Catherine’s efforts, many of Scotland’s descendants have been able to trace their ancestry. For Latter-day Saints, temple work for distant ancestors could be completed in a pre-digital era. For most of her life, Catherine, although English, was a leading authority on Scottish genealogy.[30] On 1 December 1974, at the age of 67, Catherine died in Salt Lake City, Utah, and was buried in Salt Lake Cemetery.
Catherine left behind her a rich example and legacy of gospel living and Christian service.

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[4] Catherine was the kind of Saint who gave of their time to give guest talks at a baptism while on holiday. See “From the Mission Field”, *Millennial Star*, Vol. 98, No. 32 (1936), p. 512.


[10] Family documents provided by Marie Rabe.


[12] Family documents provided by Marie Rabe.


[26] Ibid


[28] “Here is your BYU Education Week Program”, Provo Herald, 9 June 1963
