

# The Charitable Institution House

Mention the year [1820](#) and it seems an unimaginably distant past - five years after Waterloo, seventeen years before Victoria ascended the throne, long before television, radio or telephones and been invented. However, in that year Liverpool was to witness the birth of a Christian institution which is still flourishing today in the form of Tree of Life Christian Bookshop and café, run by the Charitable Institution House Trust.

The roots of the project go back to James Cropper, Samuel Hope and John Gladstone.

Gladstone had already been involved in the opening of a school, known as St Andrew's, (next-door to the shop) for the 'poor but deserving' in [1818](#). It catered at peak for [150](#) boys and [130](#) girls, rescuing them from becoming street hawkers, household drudges and chimney sweeps.

By opening the door to aspiration, it stimulated white collar work in Liverpool and created a demand for teachers.

In [1820](#), Gladstone, Cropper and Hope opened a building then known as the Charitable Institution House, set up under a trust to promote Christian work. One of the main goals was catering for the many servant girls in the city's big houses, who were seen as morally vulnerable.

The building has been known as Gladstone's since 1996 and remained so until 2018, named in honour of the son of John Gladstone, William E Gladstone, who became Prime Minister four times. The Gladstone family, Thomas father of John Gladstone and his brother Robert were Slave Merchants owning plantations in Jamaica. This information was highlighted in a BBC documentary on the 8th August 2015. Due to this revelation it was agreed by the Trustees to change the name to Tree of Life in 2018 and this name remains to this day.

However, it is probably better remembered as the location of the city's first Bible depository, from where copies of the scriptures were distributed around Britain. At one stage, some [2,500](#) women linked to the institution distributed copies of the Bible, under the patronage of the Duke and Duchess of Derby.

As the 19th century progressed, the building also housed such organisations as the original City Mission and the Deaf Society, the Religious Tract Society, the Colonial Society and groups devoted to evangelism in Welsh (it should not be forgotten that Liverpool once housed a large Welsh-speaking population, reflected in the Welsh Streets of Toxteth) and to promoting female education in India.

Later, the British and Foreign Bible Society (founded in [1804](#) to distribute bibles in Welsh) took over the premises. Its Liverpool Auxiliary was founded in [1811](#) and quickly became active in the port city. In [1915](#), the Scripture Gift Mission became involved in administration, while in [1937](#), John F Turner became involved in retailing Christian books on the premises.

The Scripture Union took over in [1973](#) and the Devonshire Road Christian Fellowship in [1980](#). Peter Gray, one of the current trustees, recalls that the building then began to be operated as Contact Christian Books, with a café also provided. Three people from the Devonshire road Fellowship served in various capacities in Contact Bookshop and Cafe at its launch in 1980. They were John Wood, Linda Chung and Peter Buckley. The Devonshire Road Trustee's were joined in the mid-[1990s](#) by the Sefton Christian Fellowship, City Church and Longcroft Christian Fellowship. It was in this period that Bill and Enid Tonge took up the reigns in running the shop. During this period a great work was done by them with Street dwellers, many of whom were on drugs or alcohol, a good number of them finding freedom from the ravages of drug and alcohol abuse at RETO in Blackburn.

The building has been known as Gladstone's since [1996](#) until 2018 ( now Tree of Life) and remains an oasis in the heart of Liverpool for busy shoppers and workers to have their bite to eat, but it is also a vital resource for Christian literature and a place where Christians and none christians can meet for relaxation and fellowship.

Since [2008](#), when the City of Culture resulted in Liverpool Outreach for the Homeless seeking a new home. They found that the premises of 18 Slater Street was ideal for their vision to reach the homeless of Liverpool. Every Sunday night, it provides a meal for homeless people, with those involved mainly coming from the Brethren and Baptist communities. A similar project takes place on Thursday nights, led by the Deeper Life Fellowship, one of the predominantly African churches which has come to Liverpool, and which puts great emphasis on making a social contribution. The building also houses the Healing Rooms and is a venue for street preachers, and various student and foreign language groups.

"I feel it has unfulfilled purpose," says Peter, as he contemplates the building's future in the wake of renovations. "We need the support of the wider Christian community," he states, 'that the present philosophy of the Bookshop and cafe can be summed up by three words, simple, sparkle and smile.'