

Wesleyan Methodists

A new wave of religious dissent appeared in England after the Anglican minister John Wesley was refused permission to preach in several Church of England parish churches in 1738. Preaching wherever he could find an audience – which often meant in the open air – he taught that every individual could have a direct personal experience of God, while salvation was freely available for all who truly repented. Welcomed by a huge popular response, Wesley's Methodist movement initially made its main headway in urban centres and industrial areas, but by the end of the eighteenth century it was achieving great success in the countryside.

Local Origins

Methodism thrived on the shortcomings of the eighteenth-century Church of England. Dinah French, who was brought up in Southrop, remembered being told that

the church in Hook Norton had not been supplied with an evangelical minister, except a curate whose preaching was more like the Gospel; he was zealous in efforts to promote a reformation in morals—going round to break up the amusements of Sabbath breakers and collect the people to divine service. His preaching and conduct was opposed to the inclination and pursuits of the official members, who, in consequence, had him quietly removed.

This almost certainly happened before 1786. Many yearned for a more evangelical and demanding religion and began to entertain the “despised Methodist preachers”. Dinah later claimed that John Wesley himself came to Hook Norton twice and preached. There is no independent corroboration, but she provides an interesting and detailed account (reproduced here as a supplement) of early Methodist efforts in the village in the book she later published after she had emigrated to the United States.¹

¹ [Dinah French], *Poems by Mrs. D. Jaques with a Sketch of her Life* (New York, 1853).

The First Wesleyan Chapel

The first record of Methodism in Hook Norton appears in 1794 when Robert Heydon's house was officially registered as a meeting place, with 12 names. Later the congregation used the "Lodge Room" in an old house in Tite Lane. In 1823 nine Wesleyan trustees bought (for £80) a building that "had been known as 'the Methodist chapel'" since at least 1815. Then in 1829 the Wesleyans bought (for £23) a 30-yard square piece of land in Well Close, which lay at the bottom of the present cemetery. There they built a chapel of their own—described in 1852 as "a good stone building"²—though it is not clear when it opened or precisely where it stood. (The Hook Norton Local History Group is planning to work out the chapel's precise position in the very near future).

The chapel was said to hold about 200 people. The 1851 Religious Census reported that 100 people attended the afternoon service and 160 the evening, while 74 children attended Sunday school. In May 1862 its annual anniversary service was followed by tea in a marquee for 450 people! The Wesleyan Methodists undoubtedly constituted the largest body of Nonconformists in Hook Norton, at a time when the Anglican Rector estimated that a third of the village were Dissenters.

For some years after 1845 a rival Methodist church—the Primitive Methodists—prospered in the village. The Wesleyans always attracted more followers and the Primitives had passed their peak by the 1860s. Having seen off this challenge, the Wesleyans decided to build a new, grander chapel.

The Second Wesleyan Chapel

In 1875 the Wesleyans demolished their chapel at the foot of Tite Lane and carried the stones up to what is now Chapel Street. On the site of five former cottages, a new chapel was constructed next to "The Old Post Office", with a 65-foot frontage on the site which has since become Chapel Mews. Built of local stone with Bath stone dressings, it boasted two elegant stone pinnacles and a window with geometric tracery but overall was "of rather austere appearance". Following the approved

² Gardiner, *Oxfordshire Directory* (1852), 851, quoted in Ashbridge, *Village Chapels*, page 57.



*Looking across Chapel Street to the Wesleyan Church,
sometime between 1910 and 1930.*

Photograph by Percy Simms, Packer Collection.

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design for Wesleyan chapels, it could seat 200 people and included a school room and vestry with partition walls that could be moved to double the space.

The chapel was part of a network that maintained a vigorous ministry among the people of the area. A regular schedule ensured a steady supply of visiting preachers and special evangelical groups, notably the Hook Norton Band (of missionaries, not musicians), worked throughout the region. One notable activist was George Ernest Golby of Hook Norton, copies of whose papers may be found in the Village Archive.

Born in January 1869, Mr Golby started work at eleven. After a life of “Sin, Sex, Evil Heart led by the enemy”, he was converted “by the power and mercy of God” in July 1890, and joined a Wesleyan Methodist class and Mission Band. He soon became a preacher and after two years, passed a theology exam and was given a regular place on the itinerant circuit. He “rejoiced over many souls stepping into the Light through the mercy of God” but remained dissatisfied with his efforts:

“May the Lord revive (and use) me to reclaim others for His Glory”. He found great consolation in “the Sabbath and its blessings and privileges”, and sought relief from his own sinful lapses: “Wash me in thine atoning blood”.

His diary documents his spiritual life and religious duties, but from time to time more practical matters break in. Initially he was often out of work but turned his hand to many things: farm work, “ground work for new buildings”, digging the railway, thatching, picture framing, as well as keeping pigs, poultry and bees. He gained a regular job with the Rural District Council Highways Department, and in 1912 he accepted promotion to surveyor, which required him to move with his family to Banbury where he lived until his death in 1938. He continued his religious work and brought up his family as strict Methodists. “In close grip with the practical”, he prayed, “may we not lose the Spiritual”. In this same spirit, his daughter Elizabeth became a Methodist missionary nurse in Nigeria between 1934 and 1947, returning to England to become a preacher, pastor and mother.³

Unfortunately the new chapel building of 1876 did not prove as sound as the faith of its members. Only twenty years later it required extensive repairs at the far end away from the road, and the roof needed bracing against wind pressure. In 1935 a severe hailstorm damaged the windows. Fifty years later, in 1984, the building was suffering neglect, both roof and windows allowed water penetration, and signs of serious structural movement were becoming obvious. Unable to afford the necessary major repairs, chapel leaders sought planning permission to redevelop the site. While awaiting a decision, one windy Sunday afternoon during a service the wall at the far end from the entrance fell down, luckily without injuring anyone in the small congregation. The building’s insurers refused to continue cover and it could no longer be used. The members were invited to use St Peter’s as a temporary home.

In April 1986 the near half-acre site was sold for £115,000, a record (according to one local paper) at the time for a small village site. Now all that remains are the names of some of the houses built on the site, the name of Chapel

³ Her life is recounted in Elizabeth Green, *Wesley’s Child: the Life Story of Elizabeth Green* (Leighton Buzzard, 1988).

CHAPEL IS WRECKED

REPORT BY KEITH WOOD

11-8-85

Seven Methodists escaped serious injury when Sunday's 47 mph gales tore into their chapel and partly demolished a gable end wall, leaving a huge gaping hole over the pulpit.

They were in the schoolroom at the side of the main chapel at Hook Norton singing hymns as part of their afternoon service when tons of stone, bricks and plaster cascaded down.

Much of the debris fell into the chapel, but some fell on to a wall and partially demolished it with a shed, which was part of the main structure of the chapel built in the 1700s.

RUMBLE

Cracks appeared in a chimney and in the remains of the gable wall. Builders were called in on Monday to assess the damage and Cherwell District Council's building control department visited the site, which was the subject of a

development application last year.

The Methodists were in the schoolroom instead of the chapel, because there were so few of them. Had it been an anniversary service or a united service or harvest festival, then the main building would have been used.

Church secretary and treasurer Annie Cross said: "There was a rumble, just a big noise and down it came."

Former organist for 14 years Sybil Heath who lives next door to the chapel, said: "We heard

this bang. We thought it was thunder, but there was a tremendous sand storm — the wall had come down."

All the pews and furniture were showered in dust and rubble. Chairs had to be propped against doors to keep the draughts and rain out.

"Had it been the harvest festival in a few weeks' time, we would have been in there. Now we shall not be able to hold it there," said Miss Heath.

"It was lucky we weren't in there. It is very sad that this should happen. We are such a small church. We are elderly, there are no young ones coming along."

DEVELOP

Efforts were made this week to get in touch with the Rev Tony Smith, superintendent of the Chipping Norton circuit, who is on holiday, to tell him of the dangers at the chapel.

Last year, Cherwell District Council's north area planning sub-committee considered a plan to develop the site with a smaller chapel and either flat or bungalows.

No decision was taken. Miss Heath commented: "I suppose this will expedite a decision on the chapel's future. We certainly can't use it."



The gale-wrecked Hook Norton Methodist church.

Banbury Guardian, 15 August 1985

Street itself, and three small capped buttresses set in garden walls. Hook Norton Methodists now have to travel to Banbury or Chipping Norton, using transport not available when every village tried to provide a religious centre for each denomination.

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References:

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