

Dinah French: The Beginnings of Methodism in Hook Norton

Little is known about the beginnings of Methodism in Hook Norton, which is surprising in view of the denomination's huge success locally in the nineteenth century. The Anglican minister John Wesley had led his great evangelical revival from the late 1730s on, finding a huge popular response in urban centres and growing industrial areas. It was generally slower to catch on in the countryside but it still seems unusually late to appear in Hook Norton.

The first record of Methodism in the village appears in 1794 when Robert Heydon's house was officially registered as a meeting place, with 12 names. But what had led to this formal establishment? We can retrieve something of what lay behind it from an obscure book of poems published in New York in 1853 by an American lady named Mrs Dinah Jaques. She revealed that she had been born in Hook Norton in 1791 as Dinah Mayo French and had grown up here in an early Methodist family.¹ But did Mrs Jaques remember correctly what she must have been told by her parents and grandmother about the early days of Methodism locally?

In 1813 Dinah had married William Jaques, a farmer and Methodist preacher, and then moved to Stourton. After her husband's death in 1838, she emigrated with six under-age children to the United States. She settled in New York State, became a US citizen, and returned to Britain on a visit in 1841. Deciding to remain, she remarried another Methodist preacher named Greenhill, and then emigrated a second time in 1848 without her husband. The book she published in 1853 was a collection of the poems and hymns she had written since her Stourton days.²

Dinah French's introductory sketch of her early life in Hook Norton throws light on local religious life in two main ways. First, she describes the deep dissatisfaction of many people with those in charge of the village's Anglican Church, who lacked religious enthusiasm, ignored the need for direct experience of God, and failed to

¹ *Poems by Mrs. D. Jaques with a Sketch of her Life* (New York, 1853), accessible through various online libraries, e.g., Google Books.

² For her emigrations, see our Emigration Stories, in the *Victorian and Edwardian Transformations* section.

maintain proper moral behaviour. Her account makes clear the uplifting message the early Methodists preached.³

Secondly, she describes the people who stimulated the initial growth of Methodism in Hook Norton, and they apparently included two visits by John Wesley himself. She describes how he found St. Peter's closed against him and chose to preach in the street, where eggs were thrown at him and his enthralled audience. But as our pioneer village historian, Margaret Dickins, discovered, there is no corroboration that Wesley ever visited the village; certainly his hugely detailed diaries and voluminous correspondence don't mention Hook Norton.⁴ Is Mrs Jaques right? She can scarcely be writing from her own recollections since Wesley died before her first birthday! She couldn't possibly be exaggerating to enhance her standing among American Methodists, could she?

However, dubious the John Wesley claim, her account of the circumstances in which Methodism was founded here and her references to itinerant preachers who visited make the outside agents are entirely plausible – but again scarcely fell within her own recollection. Joseph Entwisle and Richard Reece both served as itinerant ministers on the Oxford Circuit, but between 1787 and 1791 – before Dinah's second birthday! Here too (as also with Dr De Motte), she may be referring to men who became well-known in English Methodism nationally in later years in order to impress her American Methodist readers.

Yet such name-dropping does not necessarily invalidate the glimpses she gives of rural Methodism in the 1790s and 1800s. Such is the vivid sense of how Methodists thought and behaved that some modern readers are reluctant to dismiss her account out of hand. However unsubstantiated her comments on Wesley himself and his young disciples, her version is still worth a read. The passages relating to Hook Norton follow: what do you think?

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³ See "Wesleyan Methodists," in the *Religious Life* section of this website.

⁴ Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton* (Banbury, 1928), page 148.

From ***Poems by Mrs. D. Jaques with a Sketch of her Life*** (New York, 1853):

I was born at Hook Norton, Oxfordshire, England, June 13, 1790, being the youngest of eight children. The descendants of pious parents are highly privileged; we enjoyed this great blessing. My grandmother, whose name was Sarah Gibbs, was emphatically one of those who fear God and work righteousness. While young she was left a widow with three children – two sons and a daughter named Mary; these were brought up by her “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”. She required a strict attention to the Lord’s Day. I heard mother relate that by wandering around one Sunday evening, she violated her parent’s rule, and thus incurred her displeasure. She did not have recourse to loud upbraidings, but after a short expostulation with her child, she commanded her to retire for the night.

When twenty-four, she [Mary] was married to Samuel Mayo French, my honored father. They settled at Hook Norton, where they passed nearly half a century. In a corner of the graveyard they lie beside each other.⁵ Many a year since, the mortal part has been assimilated to its parent earth; but by the power of God, it will be reanimated and refined. My father passed the last part of his “service” with Mr. Lampet, who owned an estate at Hook Norton. This gentleman and his lady treated their young domestic more like a son than servant. Mr. L. employed the winter evenings in giving him instruction in the various branches of useful knowledge.

My parents, with the money they had saved, commenced working a small farm. Their benefactor assisted them at the beginning, and, dying in a few years after, left them a legacy of £40. ... My father now enlarged his business—chiefly from application and industry, he obtained means to bring up his large family respectably. During thirty years, he prospered and gave his children, either before or at his death, a sum of money which we in America would call very considerable. My beloved parents had been regular in their attendance at the established church. At that time, many of the clergy did not manifest a good moral example; most of them were ignorant of the plan of salvation. Their sermons were short compositions, read with no apparent feeling. The substance of their preaching was as follows: “Do your

⁵ Has this grave stone been found? Ed.

duty to God and your neighbor. As you cannot live without committing sin, when you have broken any of the commandments, you must repent," and resolve to do better in future. GOOD WORKS will recommend you to the favor of God, "he is merciful, and Christ will make up what is deficient." By many, the Outward sign, or seal of baptism, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, were believed to be saving rites. Praise the Lord for the present bright and glorious gospel day.

In my father's and mother's recollection, the church at 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 of 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 quietly had him removed. It was about the year 1786 that both my parents became deeply anxious respecting their eternal interests; they were gradually enlightened to discover that outward forms of religion and the practice of moral duties were insufficient. They saw the spirituality of God's commands – requiring a perfect obedience – extending to the motives

Before I proceed, I must digress by giving some information respecting the introduction of Methodism into my native village. Hook Norton contains 2000 inhabitants.⁶ The established church is a gothic edifice, erected long before the Reformation from Popery. It has been standing during the reign of at least sixteen successive monarchs, besides the administration of Cromwell, the protector. Some of these sovereigns wielded the sceptre half a century in this village.

There is also a Baptist meeting-house, a good substantial building. At a remote period the Baptists had here a church of self-denying members: they firmly received the arrows of persecution. At night, in a secluded field, they assembled for divine worship; there under the broad expanse of the starry heavens, these devoted worthies were accustomed to kneel on the frozen ground regardless of inconvenience, their warm hearts being poured out in solemn prayer and praise. How does the recital excite every sympathetic and religious feeling! Since that time

⁶ An exaggeration: the population of Hook Norton between 1800 and 1850 ranged between 1,000 and 1,500 people. Ed.

their meeting house has been rebuilt and enlarged; but the peaceable enjoyment of privileges has not proved altogether conducive to their spiritual prosperity. The church has increased in numbers but it may be inquired is there not a decrease in self-denial and holy zeal?

Here is a small society of Friends, or commonly denominated Quakers; they have a meeting house which has stood perhaps more than 100 years; here have gathered from time to time some sincere followers of Jesus— worshipping the Lord in spirit and in truth.

It is more than thirty years since the present Methodist chapel was erected.⁷ No very considerable revival has been witnessed; but the Divine influence has so accompanied the means that there has been a succession of members, and on the whole some increase. John Wesley, that mighty moral hero, ... at a period when spiritual darkness in a great measure covered the minds of ministers and their hearers, was called forth as a great light. Its illuminating rays were spread over the British kingdoms; and in repeated accessions of glory, radiated its beams over the Atlantic to our loved country. How are we now rejoicing in that light! Glory to God! Through his abundant loving kindness, the other quarters of the globe have partly by the same light seen a glorious Gospel day.

The Wesleys were studying at Trinity College, Oxford, preparatory to entering into holy orders. They, with eight more students, formed an association for improvement in piety and knowledge. Their strict attention to rule and order obtained for them the name of “Methodists.” The doctrines which John Wesley preached were both Scriptural and in accordance with the liturgy of the Church. He inculcated that man is a fellow creature; and that God has provided means by which we may be raised from a state of degradation, and saved from eternal ruin. He taught that we are free agents, therefore have power to choose or refuse. That the Holy Spirit is given to enlighten and sanctify—Christ is offered as a Savior—on our part, we are to return to God from whom we have revolted, repent of our past sins, and accept of salvation as a free gift. The father of Methodism had a peculiar commission to preach a present salvation, by faith alone, disclaiming all merit from good works—the witness of the spirit, or in other words, the spirit of God witnessing with our spirits,

⁷ The first Methodist chapel was erected in 1829 at the foot of Tite Lane, and lasted till 1875 when it was replaced by a grander building on what is now Chapel Street. In 1899 the site on Tite Lane became part of the modern cemetery. Ed.

that our sins are forgiven, and that God is our reconciled father— sanctification, or an entire renovation of the soul in righteousness and true holiness. These were the doctrines which Mr. Wesley commenced preaching in the Church, which he at that time never thought of leaving.

On holding forth what was viewed by some as strange doctrines, in many places the churches were closed against him. This was the case at Hook Norton, my native village. Through the influence of individuals wishing to hear him, he succeeded in ascending the reading desk; and had got through the first part of the prayers when some official members came in and ordered him down. They would have proceeded to violent measures, but Mr. Wesley walked quietly out. By his friends he was requested to stand on a large tomb in the graveyard, near the church front door: but he answered, "No, I will go from their ground." He walked across the road, and mounting some steps, there proclaimed salvation to sinners.

Hook Norton was again favored by a visit from Mr. Wesley; he preached in the street. The spirit of persecution so prevailed that minister and people were assailed with variety of missiles. A lady stood through the service, listening with earnest attention, regardless of circumstances, she patiently bore the spoiling of her silk cloak by rotten eggs. We now peaceably occupy convenient seats in commodious and beautiful buildings. Let us compare our privileges with those of the first Methodists. Let us place ourselves and our religious feelings with these zealous, self-denying bearers of reproach and suffering for the cause of Christ. Can we discover a similarity of spirit and conduct? May we never, while retaining the name of Methodists, be destitute of the power of godliness. Let us so live, that should Wesley be permitted to leave his bright abode and visit this earth, he would not be ashamed to acknowledge us as his children, while we would not hesitate to call him our spiritual father.

After Mr. Wesley's last visit, a society was formed, and Methodism was established at Hook Norton. The circuits were then very extensive – including, perhaps, thirty or forty places. The preachers were a month or six weeks going round the circuit. How did they cheerfully forego the comforts of their own home, while their labors were incessant! Preaching every night and often at 5 o'clock in the morning! We may add their family visits and frequent interviews with the societies. Their Sabbath labor was nearly twice as much as on weekdays. Do not our hearts warm, and our very souls go out towards these devoted servants of Jesus? Oh that

a similar flame of zeal were kindled in our bosom; then should we, in our measure, shine as lights in the World. Let all the members of the churches, in different denominations of Christians, attend to their duty, and come up to their own work; and the whole earth shall speedily be filled with the glory of God.

The itinerant and local preachers were at the country places gratuitously provided with board and lodging. The food was often very coarse, and the accommodation for lodging rather poor. John Nelson, in his life, mentions the circumstance of traveling with Mr. Wesley: some of their journeys were long, and such was the destitution that for nearly one day they were without food. They allayed their hunger by eating blackberries, and Mr. Wesley pleasantly remarked: "Brother, this is the best country I was ever in to get an appetite, but the worst to get it supplied. We ought to be thankful for plenty of blackberries." Several nights they were obliged to take rest on the bare floor. Although used to hardships, Mr. Wesley felt painful effects from this mode of sleeping. Turning himself at midnight, he said "Thank God, I have one whole side left."

From the time my father received the preachers, his house was evidently blessed by the Lord. He had the honor of entertaining young men who afterwards were called to important stations in the society. Joseph Entwistle [Enwisle] and Richard Reese [Reece] were of this number. They were no more than twenty years of age when they commenced their itinerant labors. They succeeded each other in the circuit to which Hook Norton belonged. Their ability was considerable – although young, they became popular. They were very studious and so anxious to redeem their time that they constantly rose at 4 o'clock in the morning – long before the family were up, they were engaged in prayer and study. The most severe cold of winter could not shake their resolution. Regardless of the want of fire, seldom enjoying that comfort before they came down to breakfast.

I cannot omit naming another of the occasional inmates of my father's house, Dr. De Motte. He was a physician, and relinquished a respectable and lucrative profession to become a despised Methodist preacher. He is no doubt now enjoying his reward. These servants of God were made eminently useful to my father's family. Robert, aged seventeen, Sarah, fifteen, and William, thirteen, were brought to enjoy experimental religion. The voice of prayer and praise then ascended to Heaven from my father's habitation, the privileged place of my birth. The remotest incident treasured in my memory is kneeling by my mother and repeating the child's

evening hymn, beginning as follows: "Now from the Altar of my heart, Let holy incense raise."

For fuller context and additional relevant information, look at the Introduction to this section of the website and at the Table of Contents.