

# CHAPTER 7

## Chapel: Primitive Methodism

By Maureen L. Ille

Methodism has its roots in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Anglicanism. In fact, John Wesley (1703-1791) was a Church of England minister, but one who sought to challenge the religious assumptions of the day. During a period of time in Oxford, he and others met regularly for Bible study and prayer, to receive communion, and do acts of charity. The term 'Methodists' was given to them there because they lived by 'method'. In origin, therefore, it was just a nickname, but John Wesley later used the term Methodist himself to mean the methodical pursuit of biblical holiness. From there the movement developed into the Methodist Church we now know.

John Wesley declared "*I live and die a member of the Church of England*" and believed that the movement he had founded should remain within the Anglican Church. The Church of England, on the other hand, was keen to distance itself from Wesley and his followers. In the end, the strength and impact of Methodism made a separate Methodist Church inevitable. In 1795, four years after Wesley's death, Methodists in Britain became legally able to conduct marriages and perform the sacraments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the BBC website ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk))

## **Primitive Methodism**

### The “Ranters”:

Methodism, as derived from Wesley, was one and undivided during his lifetime but, following his death, there were several secessions all of which maintained the name Methodist. Such were the Primitive Methodists, formed around 1811 and led by Hugh Bourne (a wheelwright) and William Clowes (a potter).

Bourne and Clowes were uneducated, rebellious, charismatic evangelists who supported the American evangelical idea of "Camp Meetings". These were daylong, open-air assemblies involving public praying, preaching, hymn singing and Love Feasts (*‘a simple sharing of a simple meal’*, not the orgy that the name seems to suggest!). The first Camp Meeting in England was held on Sunday 31 May 1807 at Mow Cop on the Cheshire/Staffordshire border.

The enthusiasm associated with revivalism was seen as disreputable by the early 19th Century establishment. In 1799, the Bishop of Lincoln claimed that the "ranter" element of Methodism was so dangerous that the government must ban itinerant preachers. Men like Bourne and Clowes were not educated members of the establishment and so their preaching and mass conversion was a challenge to 19<sup>th</sup>-century society. The Wesleyan Methodists were now trying to distance themselves from such popular culture, which bourgeois society considered vulgar. They were impatient with the ‘less respectable’ elements of Methodism. The Camp Meeting Methodists, however, were able to look back to the early days of the Methodist movement and conclude that amongst other things, field

preaching had then been acceptable. The Primitive Methodist movement could therefore be said to have started in reaction to the Wesleyan drive towards ‘respectability’. It was a movement led by the poor and for the poor.

Later, in a second stage of Primitive Methodism in the 1840s and 50s, another idea was adopted from America – ‘the protracted meeting’. The aim was to make new converts, but it was also to “*rekindle the lukewarm piety of existing members*”.<sup>2</sup> Protracted meetings, over several days, consisted of intense preaching, prayer, singing, and commitment, to engender spiritual renewal.

Despite being organised and carefully planned, these sessions could, apparently, get out of hand and become even more protracted. One such example, cited by Obelkevich, took place here in Springthorpe in 1845. It lasted for fifty-eight days! The entire village population at the time was a little over two hundred, yet the meeting resulted in at least twelve new conversions. Such meetings were usually held in the winter months when there was less demand on agricultural workers and nights were long and cold. The chapel full of people was presumably a warm and friendly place to be.

#### Later Developments:

By 1850 the Primitives and Wesleyans were showing signs that they could, in fact, surmount their differences. Primitive Methodism was mellowing and by 1850 it was more in keeping with social norms. Less emphasis was being placed on the supernatural and trances, hymns about

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<sup>2</sup> Obelkevich, p226

Hell were sung less frequently, and the revivalist enthusiasm of the Primitive leadership declined.

Unfortunately, the Primitives also became less ardent in their support of the female right to ecclesiastical equality. In 1828 women were forbidden from becoming superintendents, and in mid-century the Primitive Methodist Magazine stopped publishing biographies eulogising female preachers. Preaching changed considerably. Services became characterised by their decorum and the ministry was increasingly professional. The community's values were now more in line with 'bourgeois respectability'. In the early twentieth century, the Wesleyans and Primitives were reconciled and reunited.

The Methodist Church is now the third largest Christian Church in England, after the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. The Methodist Church is traditionally known as 'non-conformist' because it does not conform to the rules and authority of the established Church of England.

### **The Primitive Methodist Chapel at Springthorpe**

There is a street in Springthorpe called Chapel Lane, but it is not the street where we find any chapel building today. However, in 1831 a small Primitive Methodist chapel was built on the south side of this lane, and the maps indicate that it would have once stood in what is now the garden of Thorpe House. This garden is well elevated from the level of the road and it is tempting to imagine the bricks that once formed the old chapel buried beneath this modern lawn. No picture of this chapel has yet been found, yet the building survived into modern times as a Reading

Room, and is remembered still by some of the villagers (although probably as a ruin)

- † From a report in the Primitive Methodist Magazine of 1861 we discover that there was an extension of 9½ ft built onto the length of original chapel.<sup>3</sup> Two windows were added and six new pews installed “*at the top of the elevation*”. Two of the old pews were moved “*from the bottom to the top*” to make room to accommodate the Sabbath-school. This seems to indicate that the pews were ramped from front to back of the chapel. The floor in front of the pulpit was now boarded for free standing seats and a new singers stall. The cost, we are told, was £48 9s. 2d., £35 9s. 2d. having been raised by collections, donations, tea-meetings etc. In addition, £7 had been raised to buy the new harmonium.
  
- † A new chapel was built in 1898 to accommodate the ever-growing population of Primitive Methodists in the area. The original plans are in Lincolnshire Archives (see fig. ). The chapel itself (25 x 4 ft) was built to accommodate 120 people, with a schoolroom (20 x 16 feet) behind. From the plans we can see that from the schoolroom there was access to a kitchen at the rear. The kitchen had a boiler with a coalhouse attached. Outdoor toilets (a urinal and two ‘privies’, plus an ash pit) were built at the back in a separate building. The architect was John Clark of Norfolk St, Sheffield and the contractor was Mr Cooper Snowden of Grimsby.

The site was the property of Sir Hickman Bacon and Miss Beckett of Somerby Hall, who leased the ground to the Chapel Trustees for a

period of 500 years at a nominal rent charge of two shillings. There was one condition attached to this lease - in the event of the building not being used by the Primitive Methodists as a place of public worship for a period of twelve months, then the lease would expire.

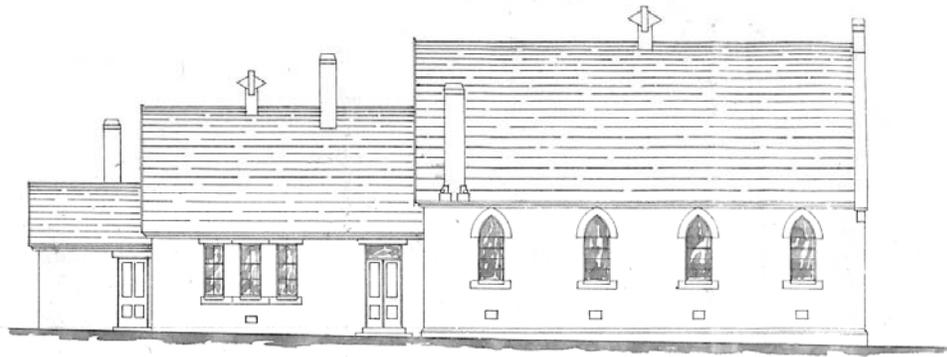
Much of this information comes from a newspaper article that appeared in the “Retford, Worksop, Isle of Axholme and Gainsborough News” (1898) in its report of the laying of the foundation stones.<sup>4</sup> Present for the occasion were Sir Hickman Bacon and Emerson Bainbridge (M.P. for Gainsborough 1895-1900) both of whom took an active part in the ceremony. The foundation stones all seem to have been granite memorial stones with inscriptions, laid by various local families in remembrance of family members. The affair seems to have lasted through the evening with hymns, speeches and prayers, and with adjournments to the granary at Mr Charles Anyan’s farm where there were refreshments provided by the chapel ladies, and a bazaar.

The new building was constructed in red brick in a neo-Gothic style, with Ancaster stone dressings. The front of the building, over the door, was inset with a wheel-like oriel window with ornamental label stops. These are terracotta heads, one male, and one female, which are almost identical with the stone ones that decorate the Parish Church.

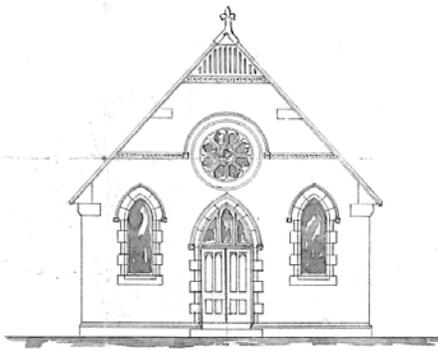
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<sup>3</sup> P.M.M. 1961 p.686.

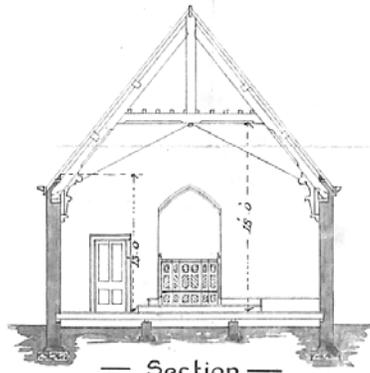
<sup>4</sup> This news report is transcribed in full in Appendix 10



— Side Elevation —



— Front Elevation —



— Section —

## The 1851 Religious Census

The year 1851 is memorable. That was the year of the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace. Genealogists know that the 1851 population census, taken on the night of Mothering Sunday, the 30th/31st March, was the first UK census to ask detailed questions about each household. It is less well known, however, that two other censuses were taken that year - an educational census of all schools (including Sunday Schools) and a census of "*Accommodation and Attendance at Worship*" - generally referred to as the "Religious Census", taken on the 30th March. Although it was intended to repeat the Religious Census in 1861 the various denominations could not agree to the form it should take and so the plan was dropped. The 1851 Religious Census was therefore the first and only one carried out in the United Kingdom.

The delivery of the forms, and the discovery of the various meeting places, was the responsibility of the local census enumerators. They had to deliver the census forms in the week before to the census, and then collect them (along with the population census forms) on the following Monday.

Three distinctly different forms were produced:

[A] Anglican Churches - black print on a blue paper

[B] Non-Anglican places of Worship - red print on a blue paper

[C] The Society of Friends or 'Quakers' - black on white paper

In addition, each form asked slightly different questions:

- All forms asked about attendance at services on Sunday, March 30<sup>th</sup>.
- Forms A and B (but not C) asked about average attendance.
- Form A, for Anglican churches only, asked about endowments, and the income of the church and its incumbent.

Many churchmen fervently opposed this last question as “too prying”.

The government eventually capitulated and removed the legal penalties for non-completion of the forms. This, of course, defeated the object of the Religious Census, as many of the returns would be only partial. It became effectively a voluntary census, although officially encouraged. In practice, however, it seems that most Anglican incumbents were happy to fill in the 'prying' sections of the form, including caustic remarks from some of the poorly paid clergymen.

Neither the Religious Census nor the Population Census asked people directly for their religious affiliation. Questions were confined to facts relating to a] the amount of accommodation provided for religious worship and [b] the number of people attending worship on the given day.

**Form A:**

1. Name and Description of Church or Chapel
2. Where Situated
3. When consecrated or licensed
4. In case of a Church or Chapel Consecrated or licensed since the 1st January, 1800; state hereafter by Whom Erected, Cost, how defrayed
5. How Endowed
6. Space available for public worship
7. Estimated Number of Persons attending Divine Service on Sunday, March 20, 1851
8. Remarks
9. Signature

**Form B/C:**

1. Name or Title of Place of Worship
2. Where Situated
3. Religious Denomination
4. When erected (those before 1800 to be indicated as pre-1800)
5. Whether a separate and entire building (this and question VI were to distinguish between cottage meetings and those in chapels)
6. Whether used exclusively as a Place of Worship
7. Space available for Public Worship
8. Number of attendants (Roman Catholic churches, which may have several morning Masses, were instructed to aggregate attendances)
9. Remarks
10. Signature

The task of tabulating the returns was given to a twenty-eight-year-old solicitor called Horace Mann. In 1854 he published his report, covering all of the census returns. Unexpectedly, the book turned out to be a best seller with over 21,000 copies being sold shortly after publication. For many people the main result was summed up in Mann's own comment: "*The most important fact which this investigation as to attendance brings before us is, unquestionably, the alarming number of non-attendances*". He further commented that most of these neglecters were to be found in the 'labouring classes'.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers, who have analysed the Religious Census of 1851 in various different ways since then, have made some interesting observations. For example, in his book The Census and Social Structure, based on the Leicestershire returns, David M. Thompson noted that:

- Nonconformist chapels are found in villages where there was no single, large landowner dominating the area.
- Chapels of older dissenting groups are often found in villages with a number of long-established freehold farmers.
- Methodist chapels are more likely found in villages where there are agricultural labourers.
- Nonconformist chapels are likely found in the larger villages where the population had grown.
- Church of England parishes generally do better than average in places of smaller population, undivided landownership and where the men are employed in agricultural pursuits.

Some of these points clearly do not apply to Springthorpe. This village did have a single large landowner dominating the area, and yet a very early Primitive Methodist chapel was built. Despite its small population of "*men employed in agricultural pursuits*" and its "*undivided*

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<sup>1</sup> See the National Archives website <http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

*landownership*”, the Church of England did not “*do better than average*” in Springthorpe.

In the chapter on Primitive Methodism in his book Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875, James Obelkevich points out the generally subordinate position of Primitive Methodism relative to its rivals, the Wesleyans and the Church of England. The Religious Census shows only 43 places of worship in the area compared with 124 for the Wesleyans and over 200 for the Church of England. Obelkevich states “*in nearly every case the Primitive Methodist attendance on Census Sunday was the smallest of the three*”. Springthorpe, he tells us, was an exception, its situation being quite untypical. It had the only dissenting place of worship in the parish, and the Church of England incumbent for much of the period was an “*outspoken Anglo-Catholic*”. This would be a reference to Rev. E.C.L.Blenkinsopp, the Rector responsible for instigating the great restorations of the church. However, the Religious Census took place in 1851 and Blenkinsopp did not take up the rectory until 1863. His predecessor, Rev.Isham Case, was the incumbent at that time, although he was resident in his other parish, Metheringham.

The information for Springthorpe, obtained from the Religious Census of March 30<sup>th</sup> 1851 by Rex Russell, shows the following:

PARISH CHURCH:

Morning Attendance: 9 people (only one morning service)

PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHAPEL:

Morning Attendance: 53 Sunday Scholars

Afternoon Attendance: 40 + 55 Sunday Scholars

Evening Attendance: 82

This shows an overwhelming support for Primitive Methodism in this village – of those attending a religious service only about 10% attended church, while 90% attended chapel.<sup>2</sup>

Oblekevich, however, looked at the record of baptisms in the chapel at Springthorpe between 1844 and 1875 and compared it with that of baptisms at the parish church. He states that about 30% of all baptisms of children living in the parish were performed by Primitive Methodists. A number of families had what are called ‘mixed baptisms’ – some of their children received an Anglican baptism while others received a Primitive Methodist baptism. It seems that farmers and craftsmen in the parish were more likely to commit to one form of ceremony or the other, while the labourers were less committed or “*guided by mere convenience*”.<sup>3</sup>

It must be noted that Primitive Methodist ‘members’ were outnumbered in the chapels of this region by ‘adherents’ and others (who attended but did not officially join) by more than two to one. There is little surviving evidence of the role played by what Oblekevich calls “*the unconverted majority*”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From unpublished research by Rex Russell provided to the Village Hall Committee following a dayschool on starting a local history project.

<sup>3</sup> Oblekevich p.240-41.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*