

**THE BICENTENARY OF GRIFFYDAM WESLEYAN
METHODIST CHAPEL**

18TH JUNE 1978



COPIES OF RELATIVE DOCUMENTS

SAMUEL T STEWART – DECEMBER 2024

PREFACE

The original building of Griffydham Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in 1778 is attributed to William Garner who first constructed and lived in an adjacent cottage, which can be seen to the right on the front cover photograph. One of the oldest Methodist chapels in the country, it finally closed its doors in 2005 due to a dwindling membership, and the last service was held on Oct 16th at 3.00 p.m. The preacher was the Rev. Harry Jones, and the organist was David Haywood. The chapel held its bicentenary celebrations in 1978 and although only a few records of the celebrations have survived, it was felt by the author that it would be beneficial to record these on his website, samuelstewart.com It was known as "Top Chapel" by the villagers in order to differentiate it from the Wesleyan Reform Chapel, known as "Bottom Chapel" which was located facing the opposite end of Elder lane, across the Rempstone road.

COMPLIMENTARY READING

"A HISTORY OF GRIFFYDAM WESLEYAN METHODIST AND WESLEYAN REFORM CHAPELS". This can be found on the author's website as a free to download and read pdf document.

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LETTER FROM THE REV. KENNETH GARRARD SUPERINTENDENT MINISTER OF THE ASHBY CIRCUIT

Dear Friends,

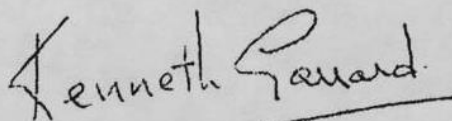
Birthdays are opportunities for being thankful. Especially is this true when a Church is celebrating two hundred years of worship, Christian experience and witness. We are grateful for all who have preceded us, for their faithfulness in the tasks to which God called them. We are grateful for our present company with its courage and loyalty declaring its living response to the Lord of the Church. We are grateful to all those who by their hard work and generous giving have made possible the essential repairs, painting and replacements which have been done in time for this two hundredth anniversary. Above all we are grateful to God for the ways in which he has led, sustained and blessed us throughout the years.

We are not only grateful, we are expressing our reliance on the Good News in Jesus, both for the present and the future. By our actions, our words and our worship we proclaim a Lord who is mighty to save and to lead men and women to wholeness. As we renovate our buildings, so Jesus renews all who will come to him.

Now let me express our thanks to the Rev. Philip Pearson for writing these interesting notes from our history. They form a souvenir of a happy occasion. We have appreciated his ministry among us and throughout the Circuit, and we wish him well in his new appointment at Lymm in the Warrington Circuit.

We also thank Mrs. Margaret Hodges for so kindly composing a birthday poem especially for us.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth Garrard". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Superintendent Minister.

NOTES BY THE REV. PHILIP PEARSON

EARLY METHODISM IN WEST LEICESTERSHIRE

Following the formation of the Methodist Societies in 1739, John Wesley's first visit to Leicestershire appears to have been when travelling to and from Nottingham he stayed with the vicar of Markfield, the Rev. Mr. Ellis, in June, 1741. He read the evening service in his church, and afterwards preached outside to the crowd who had not been able to get into the building. Markfield may thus "be regarded as the 'mother church' of these parts, a steady and pious society having been in existence there nearly from the commencement of Methodism itself", writes W. W. Stamp⁽¹⁾.

A couple of years later Charles Wesley was in the district, and on 24th May, 1743, and possibly not for the first time, he "preached the gospel to the poor in Cole Orton, who heard it with the greatest eagerness" (Methodist Recorder, 24.3.1898⁽²⁾)

On Whitsunday, 1753, John Wesley again preached at Markfield, and records in his Journal, "after dinner, a gentleman who came from Leicester invited me thither. About eight I preached there, in a place near the walls, called Butt-Close." Possibly this "gentleman" was John Brandon of whom we hear more on Wesley's next visit four years later.

He recounts that on 14th June, 1757, "we rode to Leicester, where John Brandon has gathered a small society. I preached at seven, the house (supposed to contain a thousand people) was thoroughly filled. I believe there were forty or fifty soldiers." Brandon, who was a dragoon or cavalryman, appears at this time to have joined Wesley's itinerant preachers being responsible for what Wesley called "that small circuit" of "leicester, Ashby, and the adjacent places."

Another force building up Methodism in the Ashby area was Walter Sellon, one of Wesley's first preachers and master at Kingswood school (1748-50), who later took orders in the Church of England. As curate at Long Whatton and then clergyman successively at Smisby, Ashby, and Breedon," he vindicated Wesley's actions with a trenchant pen," being one of Wesley's chief supporters in his controversy with A. Toplady, and he also influenced many through his preaching. Welcoming this support Wesley wrote to him, "I believe you strengthen the hands of our preachers all you can."⁽⁴⁾

The early days of Methodism were not without their excitements as the following incident in the "Memoir of Jane Sansom of Sheepshead", one of the pioneers, records. George Hewitt and Thomas Hucknall, when visiting Smisby to hear Walter Sellon, also attended a Methodist meeting in Ashby addressed by John Brandon, whom they invited to visit Shepshead. A large crowd gathered on Robert Bentley's croft, "among whom was John Elliott, a man of gigantic strength and stature, a celebrated prize fighter, and a terror of the whole town. . . Instead, however, of causing any disturbance, as was expected, he took his stand immediately before the preacher presenting his broad shoulders as a sort of pulpit on which Mr. Brandon might rest his hands.

For a time the service proceeded without any interruption, till at length the parish schoolmaster began to force his way through the crowd, swearing in a most outrageous manner, that he would pull the preacher down. This caused the preacher to hesitate, and Elliott addressing the preacher said, "Now, stop a bit, Mester." The preacher obeyed; and Elliott, laying hold of the schoolmaster by a leg and an arm, carried him through the congregation, and threw him among some briars and thorns; then applying to him a dishonourable epithet, he bade him lie there till the service was ended. Resuming his former station, he said to Mr. Brandon, "Now, goo on Mester." The preacher obeyed and the meeting concluded in peace." But troubles were not yet ended for "the next Methodist preacher that visited Shepshed was Mr. William Darney, who addressed a congregation in the open street. He was plentifully bespattered with mud, and no one invited him into any house, or offered him the slightest refreshment."(5)

In spite of much opposition a small Methodist society was formed in Shepshed about 1757 led by William Garner, a convert through Sellons' preaching. When the Methodist preachers had regularly visited their group for about ten years and it had failed to grow beyond six members they began to lose heart. But on hearing their fears, James Clough (a circuit preacher, 1776-7) "cheerfully exclaimed, 'Six! Blessed be God! Six faithful souls are sufficient to set a whole town on fire with heavenly love.' On hearing this their hopes were animated. They 'Thanked God, and took courage', and the pleasure of the Lord prospered among them."(6)

Aware of the movement that was developing in North-west Leicestershire, John Wesley visited Ashby in March, 1764, where he records, "The house and yard contained the people tolerably well. I saw but one trifler among all, which, I understood, was an Attorney. Poor man! If men live what I preach, the hope of his gain is lost."(7) He evidently regarded the activity in the area sufficiently important to return four other times, the last being in 1779 the year after the opening of Griffydam chapel.

SOME DERBYSHIRE ROUND PREACHERS

What is now the Ashby Circuit area was at that time in the Derbyshire Round (Circuit), which included Leicester. Notable among the preachers was Joseph Guilford (served 1765-6), a blacksmith who had joined Wesley's band of itinerants. On one occasion when seeking the protection of the courts from persecuting mobs, he was asked by the magistrate why he had taken up the work of preaching. He replied, "If, Sir, I could satisfy my conscience, I would rather be a shepherd's dog than a Methodist preacher." This man's simple but determined faith was well appreciated by Wesley who summed up his life in the words, "Never before did a man of so weak talents do so much good." High praise indeed! (8)

A convert of George Whitfield, Thomas Olivers, formerly a shoemaker, served as a circuit minister from 1770-3. He was one of Wesley's most valued helpers. He either wrote or adapted the tune Hemsley (264 in the Methodist Hymn Book), and introduced to Methodism the medieval Jewish Doxology "Leoni" (21)(9), for

which he wrote the hymn "The God of Abraham praise", which has been described by Erik Routley as "an impressive credal utterance, particularly in the context of the teaching of the Old Testament and its gospel consummation"(10)

A gravestone in Smisby Parish churchyard commemorates another circuit minister. Dated 17th March, 1809, it states that Thomas Longley was "Nearly 29 years an itinerant preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, late in connexion with the Revd. John Wesley A.M." A poem follows which includes the following lines:

"The unseen vital substance, I commit
To Him that's Substance, Life, Light, Love, to it
The leaves and fruit are dropt for soil and seed,
Heaven's heirs to generate, to heal and feed."

A native of Dewsbury, Longley served the circuit from 1782-4, his ability being suggested by a letter written to him by Wesley on 5th November, 1783, "I refer Samuel Edwards (a junior colleague) wholly to you. If you cannot trust him, he must go home. If you can, you may receive him again."(11) The problem, whatever it was, must have been resolved satisfactorily because Edwards appears in the stations at Leicester in the following year. Further evidence of Longley's character is seen in his being named in the Deed of Declaration as one of the Legal Hundred (in 1784), that is, the ministers who formed the governing body of the Methodist Church. He was remembered as a circuit minister who served "with general approbation and success."(12)

Under leaders of this calibre the work had so developed that the congregations in the Ashby area were able to be separated from the parent Derbyshire Round in 1792 and form a circuit on their own. The first Superintendent was another of Wesley's trusted assistants, Joseph Taylor, whose later career included his being elected President of Conference. His junior colleague was Richard Hardacre.

GRIFFYDAM

It seems fairly certain that Ashby was the first Society in the present circuit, but Griffydam is the oldest Methodist building still in use. The beginning of Griffydam Methodism is attributed by Jane Sansom to William Garner (mentioned above) who "was the means of forming a society and of erecting a chapel at Griffy-Dam where he resided for several years." (MM 1825 page 585). There is a strong local tradition that John Wesley preached at Griffydam on an occasion some years before the visit he records in 1779. It seems likely that this visit would have been arranged by Garner and his friends. We are told that "the news that Wesley intended preaching in the neighbourhood had spread far and wide, and there was a large congregation waiting (in the open air). A squire who had great influence among the colliers resolved, if possible, to hinder the preaching. He primed the men with liquor. Armed with truncheons, the swarthy guardians of orthodoxy gathered on the brow of the hill. John Massey, an athlete, a renowned pugilist, the terror of every wake and fair in

north Leicestershire was appointed captain of the anti-Methodist gang. He had as his lieutenant a man of like turbulent and daring spirit. The squire gave orders that John Massey should lead a band on Wesley's right and the other man on his left. No doubt the little evangelist was quite well aware of the plot against him but he never showed the white feather and seemed rather to enjoy a spice of danger . . . Calmly he proceeded with song and prayer. As he was about to commence the sermon Massey looked at him savagely, but thought he would just hear a little of what he had to say.

"Under the spell of that wonderful voice the athlete's heart began to beat violently. A big tear rolled down the swarthy cheek. The colliers became impatient. One man cried out, 'John! why dunna ye gi' th' word o' command?' John's reply must have come like a thunderbolt: 'If ony mon touches th' praicher I'll straighten wi' him on th' pit bonk tomorrow mornin'.' There was not a man present who cared to meet John Massey on the pit bank or anywhere else. But the Lord had a grip on the man's conscience, and he never rested until there came the peace of God and the new creation. The converted collier became one of the most successful local preachers in the neighbourhood."(13)

Whatever the truth of this story, there certainly was a John Massey of the Gelsmoore, a collier, listed as one of the first trustees of the chapel on a document dated 9th May, 1778, and on the right of the building stands a black slate tombstone with the words "John Massey, who departed this life, August 23rd, 1819, aged 87," and underneath "Deborah, his wife, July 18, 1820, aged 84."



It is also a documented fact that William Garner, then a bricklayer at Worthington and Ralph Pope a labourer of Newbold purchased the land on which the chapel stands in 1776 for £57. 15. 0. This appears to have been a preparatory move directed towards the erection of the chapel and the appointment of trustees on 9th May, 1778. In addition to the names mentioned; there were John Hall (Hale?) of Tonge, a yeoman, Thomas Varnham of Lount, a farmer, John Fariner of Osgathorpe, a farmer, William Newbold, of Packington, a flaxdresser, Robert Heathcote, of Packington, a tammy weaver, Samuel Clarke, of Ashby, a framesmith, John Shermer, of Tonge, a maltster, and Matthew Finch, of Swannington, a collier. The building was to be used as "a place of public worship commonly called a Methodists Meeting House."⁽¹⁴⁾ It is interesting to note that the trustees are subject not only to John Wesley, the doctrine taught to be agreeable to his notes on the New Testament and four volumes of Sermons, but also his brother Charles is given equal authority, perhaps reflecting his long standing interest in this particular area.

The earlier documents always refer to the place as "Griffith Dam", the first use of the current form of Griffydham being in 1869.

Fourteen years after being first built the chapel was enlarged and it was restored in 1862. The building's certification as a place of worship is dated 1.6.1854 and it was registered for marriages on 8.2.1870.

Over many years a Love Feast, the ancient Christian Agape, was held at

Continued over page

Griffydam annually on Easter Monday, and attracted people from Derby, Leicester, Birmingham, as well as the towns and villages of the neighbourhood. "The service commenced at half-past one, filling the whole afternoon and ending with a sermon, usually in the evening." (15) A regular visitor leading this occasion was the Rev. James (Jimmy) Bradburn. Water was passed round the worshippers in two-handled glass cups, and also slices of bread. The custom continued until about 1960.

At one time a minister occupied the house above the chapel. A plain black tablet bears the following inscription: "Opposite lies interred the remains of Elizabeth, wife of the Rev. W. Stokes, who died 24 November 1829, aged 26. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." The young wife lies buried under the floor of the chapel. She died in the minister's house." (16)

The last trustees appointed prior to the new Methodist constitution were: Florence J. Johnson, L. Wesley Rowell, May Rowell, William & Gertrude Bird, May Clamp, Annie Hodges, Hilda M. Hutchinson, Herbert E. Rowell, John C. Campion, F. Mary Lacey, John C. Purling, William G. Conibear, the chairman of the meeting being the Rev. William M. Nicholas.

The bicentenary celebrations at Griffydam are a time to look back with thanksgiving and forward with hope. We are conscious of the communion of saints, that is of men and women who in earlier days had very little but faith - faith that moved mountains - and have left us a wonderful heritage. Let us be equally aware that the same faith can also be ours, faith in a living God, who still leads his people.

* * * * *

NOTES

1. W. W. Stamp, "Methodist Magazine," 1834, page 102) (Other references to Methodist Magazine abbreviated to "MM")
2. "Methodist Recorder" article on the Ashby Circuit 24th March, 1898. (Other references to this article abbreviated to "MR")
3. "Journal of John Wesley" edited by N. Curnock, 1938, vol 5, page 168
4. "Letters of John Wesley" edited John Telford, 1931, vol 5, page 168
5. W. Dalby "Memoir of Jane Sanson of Sheepshead, Leicestershire" in MM, 1825, page 583-4
6. MM 1825, pages 584-5
7. "Works of the Rev. John Wesley", 3rd edition 1829, vol. 3, page 163
8. MM 1834 page 105
9. A. S. Gregory "Praises with Understanding", Epworth 1949, page 162
10. "Hymns today and tomorrow", Libra, 1966, page 111
11. "Letters of John Wesley", 1931
12. "Journal of John Wesley", 1938, page 337
13. MR
14. From Deeds from Circuit Safe
15. MR
16. MR

Margaret Hodges who wrote the following poem for the bicentenary of the chapel was married to Len Hodges, the son of Frederick and Emmeline Hodges (nee. Wilton) who lived on Zion Hill, Pegg's Green. They lived at Coalville. The large Hodges families were staunch supporters of Griffydam Wesleyan Methodist Chapel.

GRIFFYDAM METHODIST CHURCH

Congratulations - what's this we hear?
You're just 200 years old this year!
We pray for God's blessing and faith that will last
We send you our love, remembering the past.
God's House on the hill where John Wesley prayed
He brought the Gospel on horseback but stayed
A very short time - reception was "stony" -
They feared for his life and the life of his pony.

Villagers regretted, felt a great sense of loss,
God was at work to bring all to the cross.
Pitman and farmer, trader and teacher
Were saved and converted by God's holy preacher
Who brought the life-giving joy of God's Word.
On Griffydarn Hill the gospel was heard.
This gospel, the same, yesterday and tomorrow
Brings healing and joy, after pain and sorrow.
Thank God for good gifts, his love and his care,
Each other's burdens to make us all share.
May we see his vision, sing out His praise
May we in the future see more fruitful days.
Be happy, be loving, with no sense of loss -
God is still working - come to the cross.

Welcome! to God's house where John Wesley prayed
Where no holy anthem or organ was played.
Our forefathers built up this church, you see,
And we must plan now for God's family.
Children today still stand up and sing
Anthems and praises to make rafters ring.
Sunday School strengthens - gives power to the church -
Educates scholars - no need for research.
Bring up a child in the way he should go,
With the passing of time a good man he will grow.

All children, 'Come,' He said, "I am the way"
The direction, dear Christian, is with you today.
Thank God for the message, His love and His power
To continue to grow in His Spirit each hour.
Be happy, be loving with no sense of loss -
God is still at work saying "Come to the cross."

Your presence is needed - Here you can pray,
Sing anthems of praise, the organ will play.
You're welcome in God's House on Griffydarn Hill
Where John Wesley prayed, so peaceful there still.
We think of our loved ones now with God above.
Take water and bread as a symbol of love -

This water and bread makes a LOVEFEAST so real
With praise' and repentance -Pentecostal Appeal.
Come to the fountain of Peace and Goodwill
God is at work - he is working still.
Is your heart stirring? No sense of loss?
God is still working - so, come to the cross.

We think of the future of Griffydam Hill
There John Wesley prayed, now peaceful and still
We see a bright future - of this we are sure –
God is at work, His message is pure,
Foundations on rock - so how can we doubt.
His church here is working God's purposes out.
This Church, built in 1778
Wide open its windows, wide open its gate.
We meet with each other - our sins confessing
And read from the Bible - our nation's rich blessing.
God bless the church - all the people within it
God save their souls, make sure every minute
Is used for profit - to further the cause,
Flow of the life blood, the living source.
Good people - be willing to give Him your heart
So, may we all do this before we depart.

Ask God for help to fight the good fight.
He gives us courage, He knows our plight.
Wide is the ocean of sin, and so dark.
A haven we crave for - like Noah with the Ark.
Safe guiding our frail ship is God at the helm,
Our Captain, our King, of all heaven's realm.
Yes! God is at work on Griffydam Hill
Where John Wesley prayed his task to fulfil.
After 200 years we make a new start,
We give God our talents, we give Him our heart,
We give Him our treasure, make joyful rhyme,
We give Him our voice, we give Him our time,
Give Him the love He so freely gives us!
We call Him friend - His name is Jesus.

MARGARET HODGES.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Note, the Pall referred to is a cloth for covering the coffin at a funeral.

SOME ITEMS FROM AN OLD ACCOUNT BOOK

			£	s.	d.
1839	June	16		3.	9.
	October	11		1.	17. 6.
	November	1		1.	6.
				14.	0. 0.
1840	February	3		1.	0.
		19		3.	0.
	December	7		12.	0.
1841	August	14		3.	10.
1843	April	6		5.	0.
				4.	0.
	October	19		2.	2.
1867	October			44.	3. 6.
				2.	11. 0.
				1.	6. 0.
				1.	10. 0.
				51.	5. 6.
				2.	2. 10.
1877	October			8.	8. 9.