

Methodism: the local picture

Development of Methodism

In 1729 a group of 15 university men started meeting in Oxford to examine how a faithful life should be led. From these meetings they drew up a Rule of Life which stated they should be diligent in:

1. studying the scriptures
2. caring for the poor, sick and prisoners
3. observing Wednesday as well as Friday as a day of abstinence
4. communicating (taking communion) at the altar as frequently as they could find opportunity.

The group was called the Holy Club or Methodists. The latter name was a nickname, perhaps given to them by scoffers, in a similar way that Friends had become known as Quakers, originally intended as an insult. The group included among its members John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and Benjamin Ingham. Whitefield and Ingham eventually went their separate ways, Whitefield being associated with the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion and Congregationalists, and Ingham founding the relatively short-lived group known as Inghamites.

The brothers John and Charles Wesley were sons of a high churchman, the rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire. John Wesley, 1703-91, did not intend to found a separate church. He urged attendance at the parish church; Methodist meetings were intended to supplement but not to oppose or replace Anglican worship. He organised the Society on the basis of bands, classes, circuits and conferences. He himself undertook a peripatetic ministry of nearly half a century. Lay preachers were appointed to teach and convert.

A contributory factor to the success of this missionary work was the novelty of the wealth of hymns composed by Charles Wesley and others. In 1784 the Methodist Church was enrolled in the Chancery Court as a corporate body. It became an established sect, with its own clergy and churches, but with the continuing importance of lay preachers. Wesley had striven to keep the Society within the established Church, but over time it inevitably became a separate sect.

The middle and later eighteenth century was a time of social upheaval, what we summarise as the industrial revolution and the agricultural revolution. The established Church did not respond quickly enough to changing social conditions. Its weaknesses included many ancient parishes of great size with exploding populations, absentee clergy and infrequent communion.

Warmington at that time was typical of many small rural communities, experiencing much social distress, its spiritual needs catered for by a succession of curates-in-charge.

Local Methodism

In the early days, itinerant preachers and then lay preachers as they were appointed, disregarded the confines of ecclesiastical parishes, initially preaching in the open air, and then, once a nucleus of adherents had formed, in barns or homes. They emphasised the importance of conversion, a turning away from a sinful, heedless or purposeless life to a thoughtful following of the 'rule or method'. In this area, lay preachers covered several villages, converting and then ministering to the nucleus or 'class' in each village. Later, when chapels were established, the old ecclesiastical boundaries were again ignored; the trustees typically were the circuit minister (based in a neighbouring town), half a dozen prominent Methodists from the surrounding area, and three or four village men.

The Society at Oxhill was an early one. One of Mr Wesley's preachers, John Pawson, was preaching there in 1769, and regular cottage meetings followed. Indeed Oxhill claimed, at a much later date, to be the mother of the Banbury Society. This claim may well be true. John Ward, a yeoman farmer of Oxhill, was the man who entertained the Wesley preacher John Pawson, and a James Ward, dyer of Banbury, entertained Wesley himself in 1790.

It was James Ward, together with Lionel Ledbrook, yeoman of Knightcote, who built the first Banbury Chapel in 1791. The Ledbrooks were associated with other chapel building in our immediate area. The first Banbury chapel was at the top of Calthorpe Street and was soon outgrown. James Ward was still involved when a new chapel was opened in Church Lane in 1812. The congregation moved to Marlborough Road in 1865.

In Warmington, the Society of People called Methodists held their 'class' in the home of a man called Thomas Stanton. We do not know, but can roughly guess, when these meetings started. Thomas Stanton was born in Warmington in 1728, son of Richard and Mary Stanton, and he died here at the age of 77 in 1805. The class met in Warmington on Sundays at 7am in winter and 6am in summer. It was led for many years by a man called William Collins, who walked over and back in all weathers from Northend.

William Collins, a baker by trade, was not only class leader at Warmington and Northend, but he built a chapel over his bakery which was still open at the turn of the 21st century. The tale of William Collins' conversion is entertaining and illuminating. As far as I can judge it took place around 1780. He was converted by a Mr Ledbrook - whether the chapel builder or another of the same family is not clear.

From the Methodist Recorder, winter issue 1900/01

"The Gospel as preached by the Methodists, came to Northend in this fashion. William Collins, a baker and hawker of Banbury Cakes, was a native of Avon Dassett, and for some years lived at Knightcote. He was a very wicked man, a drunkard and utterly vicious, the last man in the world, you would have said, to be the bearer of good tidings to the meek. Over and over again, however, we have known these very bad men to be converted and then to throw all their native energy into the work of an evangelist. It was so with William Collins.

It was said of this baker that he was always brewing some mischief. When he was setting the dough he was planning some new devilment. He got his living partly by attending wakes and fairs selling his cakes, and no sooner had he emptied his basket than he was ready for any evil sport. Comic songs or card-playing, cockfighting or cursing, no wickedness came amiss. He became the ringleader of all evil, until his name was associated with rioting and drunkenness in all that part of the country.

Once, at Boddington feast, he pretended to be blind, and was led about by another man begging money, which was soon spent on drink. Depraved and half-damned it seemed as though there was no depth of degradation too low for him. Sometimes when he could not get drink any other way he would, for a wager, eat the ale mugs, grinding the earthenware with his teeth while the blood ran out of his mouth.

He was so far gone in evil his family were afraid of him. He threatened their lives, and on one occasion tried to murder his wife, and would have done so but for the cry of 'Murder!' which was raised, and which brought in the neighbours. There was a Mr Ledbrook who came preaching the Gospel in those parts. This was what Baker Collins did not like, and he set himself to the work of annoying the good man who had come to declare the truth as it is in Jesus. This was delightful fun to the sons of Belial, who mustered in great numbers, knowing that Collins would lead them on. It was his delight to stand in the doorway with his basket shouting his wares, and all the time Mr Ledbrook was preaching he would be crying, 'Banbury Cakes, Banbury Cakes!'

As the Lord would have it, one day Collins came to the preaching, but none of his companions came. He was there, but alone, as far as the wicked were concerned. The preacher was in good form, and the godly people were all alive, and the persecutor was in a minority. He stood in the doorway, his hat on his head, but having none to help did not dare to begin to cry his wares. The Master of assemblies was present, and drove a nail into the baker's heart. It was never taken out. Poor wretch, he did not know where to look. The preacher never took his eyes off him, and spoke on until the wicked man turned away from his wickedness and saved his soul alive!

There was a stir all over the country. It soon was told in every village 'Collins has turned Methodist!' It was true. 'Instead of the thorn came up the fig tree'. Fairs and feasts missed his ribaldry as well as his Banbury cakes. The wicked would have liked to trouble him, but he was a stalwart. He had such physical strength and courage they dare not tackle him, for fear he should forget he had become a Methodist and give them a skinful of sore bones apiece.

Such a conversion greatly helped our people. Methodism became established; numbers of men and women were converted and the Church was built up. This was more than the enemy could bear, and organised persecution became the order of the day. As the Methodists went or came out to the preaching they were stoned by mobs, but Collins was always to the front and would hold the crowd at bay, receiving on himself the stones and filth which were intended for the people of God.

After a time the place where the Methodists had the preaching passed out of their hands, but Collins became the Obed-edom of Northend. (*Obed-edom provided David with a refuge for the Ark of the Lord. 1 Chronicles, chapter 13*). He opened his house, but that was too small; so with his own hands, and at his own expense, he built a room over the bakehouse, which the Methodists used all his life, and which he left in his will for them to use after his death. He prospered in his business, and though some of his neighbours said the Methodists would ruin him, he left a good sum of money to be divided among his children.

The cake maker was not only the class-leader at Northend, but every Sunday morning he met the class at Warmington. The people met at seven in the winter and six in the summer. He walked this four miles there and back again in all weathers."

The Warmington class or Society met in the house tenanted by Thomas Stanton. After his death in 1805, meetings continued in the home of Elizabeth Hirons, and this building was licensed as a Chapel on 29 October 1810. It seems very likely that the decision to register the house as a Chapel was not undertaken lightly, and much deliberation, perhaps over a generation or so preceded it. Some sixteen years earlier a Thomas Bass, a Warmington stone mason, in association with his sister and brother-in-law, called Mountford, conveyed the Warmington property and a similar one in Tysoe to a man called William Geden. It seems probable that even as early as 1794 there was this intention to form a Trust to hold property on behalf of the Society.

William Geden, the man to whom the property was conveyed, was a breeches maker in Tysoe. There is reference to him in *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe*, page 83:

"The Tysoe chapel had been founded by a group of three men and one woman, the ablest among whom was William Geden, tailor (if I have his craft correct) and shopkeeper. The little group had at first held prayer meetings in cottages, leaving the door wide open on the street as an invitation to passers-by, but it seems these were annoyed by the Methodists' excited 'converse with God', declaiming and praying about Divine Glory and the 'Lover of Souls'. For these early saints there were terrific moments in life; light broke at the time of salvation on each convert as if he were on the road to Damascus. In their last illnesses they would see visions and sink to death exclaiming, 'Glory! Glory! Glory!'

William Geden was the first tradesman in lax days to close his shop on the Sabbath, refusing rigidly to 'oblige' He would publicly tackle drinker and Sabbath-breaker about his sins, were the sinner poor or wealthy, high or low. But the sinners had retaliated. Time after time young men, the sons of Belial, had rushed into his meetings to scoff; they had waited for him after services to beat him and he had been obliged to slip away and hide in outhouses, or lie in a hedge behind long mowing grass.

Geden funded and cherished the small Oxhill Society. For thirty years he walked summer and winter in all weathers across the open fields to the Sunday evening services there, and then again to a class

meeting on a week night. When he was over seventy he was still to be seen setting out, stout stick in one hand, a lantern in the other."

These quoted passages tell of the scoffing and physical abuse which had to be endured, which has now passed out of living memory. An echo of their religious fervour lingers in the stories told of William Simon Stranks and Marjorie Bull of Warmington in the early twentieth century - he would loudly interject 'Alleluia' and 'Amen' in the Methodist service and she would become totally lost in fervent prayer.

What names can we put to the early Warmington Methodists? Elizabeth Hiron, whose home became a chapel, was one. Elizabeth was a niece of John and Hannah Howkins, whose graveyard memorial breathes Methodism in every line.

John Howkins died in 1800:

"Here lies the Body of Our departed Friend,
Mortal was his life, Spiritual was his end.
How hard he read & prayed and Found it all in vain,
Until his Soul Through Christ was born again.
Dear Reader think and now Consider well,
No Outward works can save thy soul from hell.
Ye must be Born again, Your Lord doth say,
Repent, Believe, there is no other way."

His widow, Hannah Howkins, died in 1821:

"The body of a Christian now lies here
To whom the house of prayer and saints was dear
Whose meek and humble mind by faith thus sought
Those heights of purest love which Jesus taught
Her faith and hope both formed a prospect bright
To hear and speak of Christ was her delight.
The hand was Martha's and the heart was love,
And now she's way'd to the realms above.
Reader there's nothing here but truth inscribed
For thus this Christian lived and thus she died."

Hannah Howkins was a wealthy woman, judging by the many bequests in her will. She was also principal benefactress of the Wesleyan Chapel, according to the address given at its centenary celebrations. Her niece, Elizabeth Hiron, became the second wife of John Cambray, remembered today by the name Cambray House. I do not know if John Cambray was a Methodist - maybe his wife converted him. Like John Howkins, Cambray was a man of property. He was a churchwarden in his early days, but, significantly perhaps, he did not take on the role again, although he was a Poor Law Overseer for many years. His name occurs as a trustee in several later deeds and wills of known Methodists.

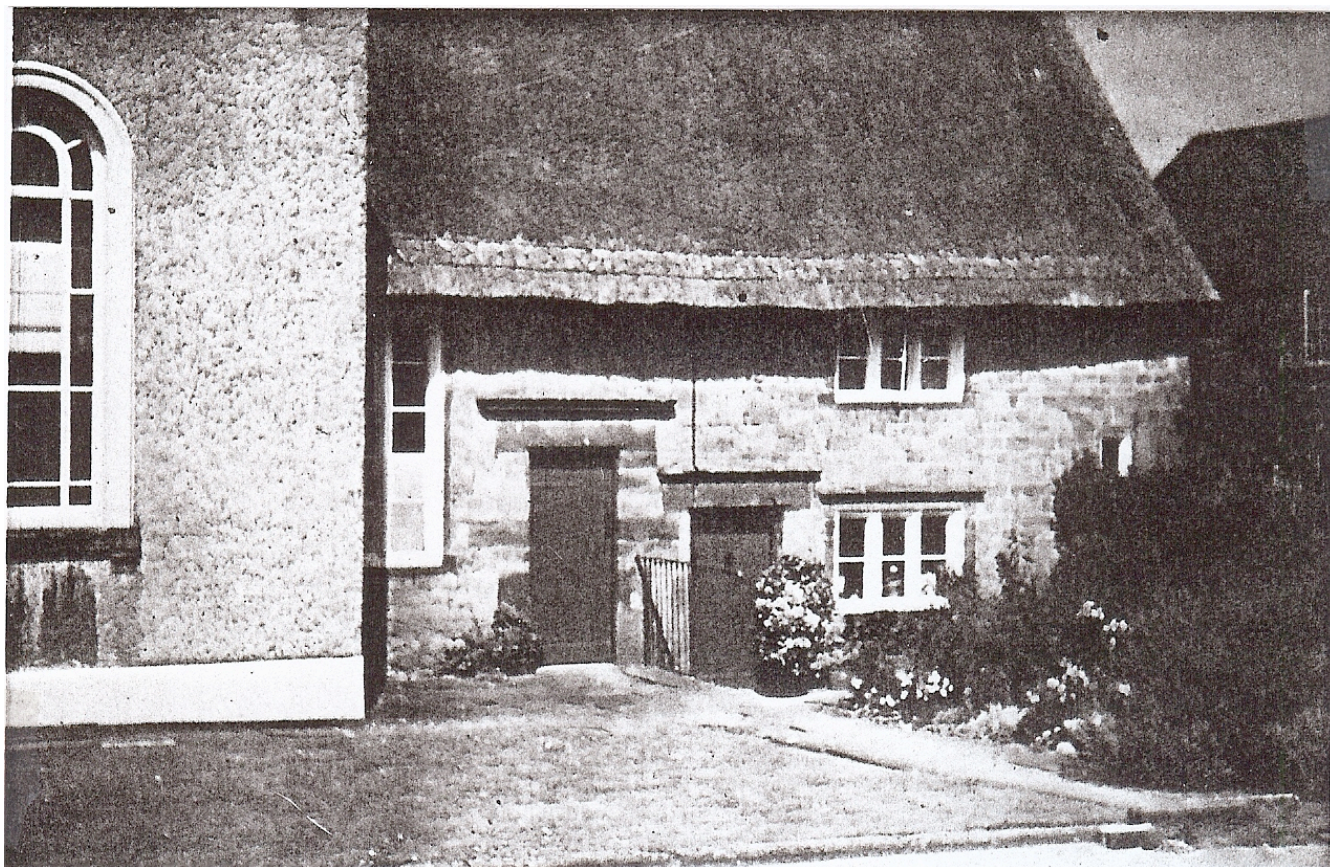
Other early Warmington Methodists are revealed in a somewhat sketchy search I undertook of Banbury Methodist baptism registers. Four Warmington babies appear in the register in 1810-12. Joseph Eales, or Eles, son of John and Elizabeth, was baptised in 1810. Thomas and Mary Hawtin had two sons baptised in 1810 and 1812. Jabez Bunting, son of Samuel and Elizabeth Bunting of Warmington, was also baptised in 1810. Jabez was perhaps named after a Methodist well known in his day; Jabez Bunting, 1772-1858, was three times President of the Wesleyan Conference. The names of witnesses at these baptisms are revealing. They were John Lord, Hannah Howkins, Thomas Hawtin, Elizabeth Hiron, Thomas Hall and Samuel Huggins.

For most of the early Methodists, however, baptisms, marriages and burials continued at the parish church, for they had little alternative. Before civil registration began in 1837, baptism was a legal requirement, but to early Methodists conversion was more important. The first burial here when a Methodist minister officiated was as late as 1910.

The Hawtin family were staunch supporters of the Chapel through five generations. Thomas Hawtin was a shoemaker of School Lane who died in 1835. His son, also Thomas and a shoemaker, died in 1877. His son Richard, shoemaker and later village carrier, lived at Holly Cottage. His son John, a carpenter who built his home, now called Holly Bush House, in School Lane, was Chapel Steward and died in 1968. His daughter, Barbara, Mrs Alfred Locke, sadly died in mid-life.

Hawtin has been a local name for generations and it is difficult to trace all relationships. Hannah Howkins was a Hawtin by birth. One of the beneficiaries in her will was her nephew James Hawtin, a Shotteswell farmer. He was listed among the first Trustees of several local chapels, including Oxhill. On his death in 1840, James Hawtin left generous legacies to his two granddaughters. One was Judith Hawtin, who became the wife of William Simon Stranks.

The cottages attached to the Chapel belonged to the Trustees. Rating lists of the early 19th century show the occupiers of these two cottages; one was converted to a schoolroom in 1872. Sarah Cambray, the widow of a shoemaker related to the wealthier John Cambray already mentioned, tenanted one of the Chapel cottages throughout her long widowhood. Sarah was born a Coggins, again a name of early members. The Chapel received a legacy in 1924 in memory of George Coggins, a nephew of Sarah Cambray. The other Chapel cottage in the mid-nineteenth century was where John Cleaver brought up his family. A generation or so earlier, a William Cleaver (relationship not traced) had died in a typhus epidemic in 1826; his graveyard epitaph suggests he was converted to Methodism in the late 1790s. Moving on in time, one of John Cleaver's daughters, Esther, became Mrs Richard Hawtin.



This photograph of around 1960 shows the entrance and doorway of the schoolroom, part of the alterations made in 1872.

It was natural that young men and women, reared in Methodist homes, should seek partners in other Methodist families. In a similar way, Methodist mothers might prefer that their daughters go into service in other Methodist households, and Methodist farmers might prefer to employ Chapel men. Landowners too might favour men of their own persuasion.

Several of Warmington's long-standing yeoman families converted to Methodism at an early date. Samuel Huggins (1767-1835), who witnessed the Jabez Bunting baptism in 1810, had an extensive farm stretching from what is now known as Cedar Bank up to Camp Lane and the Arlescote boundary. His farmhouse today is called Agdon House. His eldest son, also Samuel, inherited the Warmington farm. His second son, Simon, married the girl next door, Sarah Judd, and they framed at Westcote Barton. Their children's baptisms appear in Chipping Norton Wesleyan registers. Simon and Sarah took two of the Coggins' family with them to Westcote to work on the farm. (Sources 1851 census and information from a descendant).

Samuel Huggins' third child was Alice (1802-1875) who married Richard Judd Miles, a descendant on his mother's side of the old Warmington yeoman family of Judds. Richard Judd Miles left his mark on the Warmington landscape. The barn on Camp Lane, demolished some 35 years ago and known to some as Hawtin Jarvis' Barn, carried a datestone RJM 1832. Two other significant buildings owe their origin to the links between the Huggins and Miles families. The house Cedar Bank, with its integral baker's oven, was built on Samuel Huggins' land around 1800, providing home and employment for Baker Miles. The village shop was converted from buildings on the Huggins' homestall and run for many years by William Miles, shopkeeper, postmaster and tailor, a son of Alice and Richard Judd Miles. William's son, Howard, was a pupil teacher at Warmington's Board School before training, around 1900, at the Methodist Westminster College.



*The Village Post Office - The Minister pays a Pastoral Visit.
Warmington's"quaint old village post office, the home of the preachers when they come round, in which mother was getting her son's things ready for Westminster." (Quoted from the Methodist Recorder, 1900.)*

Other names which probably should be included among the 'pioneers' are members of the Taylor, Elkington, Gardner and Walden families. Either among the founding fathers, or a generation later, could be added members of the Jarvis, Bachelor and Timms families.

Conclusion

Because of dwindling membership, the Warmington Methodist Chapel closed in 2009, a couple of years short of its bicentenary. But the society of the people called Methodists had been in existence in the village for some decades before the building was licensed for worship in 1811. And for some two hundred years it had a marked influence on the life of the community. It absorbed the Warmington Primitive Methodist Chapel, which had flourished for a generation or so when the village population peaked in the 1850s and 60s. In the time before compulsory education, the Methodists ran their own small schools in the village, in preference to attendance at the National (Church of England) School. Both chapels had adjoining schoolrooms, for adult religious education and Sunday School teaching. The numerical strength of Methodism in the village was undoubtedly a major contributing factor in the decision to build a non-denominational Board School in 1879, rather than a C of E School.

Few of the chapel archives have survived, although some are preserved in the Banbury circuit records. I am particularly indebted to Dorothy Wootton and her nephew John Neal, both of Warmington, for their help in providing material to guide this research.

Script by Elisabeth Newman, 2013.

Many of its archives have not survived, although the property deeds were preserved in circuit records.