

◆ The role of soldiers in the origins of Wesleyan Methodism in Brighton and other towns on the Sussex Coast

by Michael R. Hickman

Methodism spread in England fairly unevenly and by different means. The most common ways in which Methodist societies began were through the journeys of the Wesleys, the preaching of their assistants and the arrival into an area of Methodist families who brought their faith with them. Methodism in the coastal towns of Sussex had a very unusual origin in that it was Methodists in the army who were the main or contributory founders of Methodist societies along the coast from Chichester to Bexhill and at towns like Lewes. This article looks at the role of soldiers, especially those in the Militia, in establishing and sustaining these Methodist societies, focusing on their role in Brighton. It shows that it was not until the legal changes in 1803, which allowed Methodists and others to worship freely on Sundays, that Methodist soldiers could found or support Methodist societies on such a scale.

In his study of ‘dissent’ in Sussex Neil Caplan noted that ‘[i]t was not until after 1803 that the Wesleyan Methodists began to make any substantial headway in Sussex away from the Rye district and the border with Kent’.¹ Indeed, Sussex and south-eastern England in general have been regarded as a ‘Methodist Wilderness’.² This article will argue first, that possibly uniquely, the major factor in the origin of Methodism in much of Sussex in the first decade of the nineteenth century was the presence of Methodists in the armed forces and secondly, that this factor could only come into play with the legislation in 1803 which allowed Methodists and others in the armed forces to practise their faith.

INTRODUCTION

The name ‘Methodist’ was given to several streams in the evangelical movement of the eighteenth century. One of the best known was the following of George Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon, whose members eventually became the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion with several chapels in Sussex, e.g. in Brighton (built in 1761 and enlarged in 1767)³ and in Lewes in 1775.⁴ Secondly, there were the followers of John and Charles Wesley. Their followers eventually became the Methodist Church. The major difference between Whitefield and the Wesleys was that Whitefield took the Calvinist view that salvation was limited to those whom God had

chosen, whereas the Wesleys adopted the Arminian position that all could be saved. For this reason their followers were often called Arminian Methodists as well as Wesleyan Methodists. This article will refer solely to the Wesleyan tradition and the word ‘Methodist’ will be used here only in that sense.

METHODISM

One of John Wesley’s strengths was his organizational skill. Newly converted Methodists became part of a ‘society’ (at first within the Church of England) and each society had ‘classes’. A Methodist was expected to meet in class each week and worship with the society, and to attend worship at the parish church on Sundays as well. Societies were grouped in circuits, and Wesley appointed his ‘assistants’ to the circuits where they travelled around the societies. The assistants would travel, that is to say be itinerant, and preach wherever they were sent; their role evolved into the Methodist ministry. The ministers met each year in Conference which, after Wesley’s death in 1791, became the governing body of Methodism electing a different minister as President each year. It was Conference which stationed ministers in each circuit, at first for a maximum of two consecutive years. Preachers who remained in the local circuit and who therefore were not ‘itinerant’ became the Local Preachers of Methodism; they were not members of the Conference.⁵ Although words such as ‘minister’ and

'Reverend' (or 'Rev.')

 were not in contemporary usage, they are used here to avoid confusion.

As the numbers of members in the societies and the circuits grew, so the circuits were divided to create new ones in order to provide both for continual growth and adequate pastoral oversight by the ministers appointed by Conference.

Methodists kept detailed statistics, including the numbers of members which were reported for each circuit at the annual Conference. The first complete return was made at the Conference of 1767.⁶ These statistics are recognised as being the 'longest, and in many ways the best, [for any] British church membership'.⁷ Table 1 gives the numbers of members in Sussex returned for the Sussex circuits in certain crucial years.

Table 1. The numbers of Methodist members in Sussex during the war with France.

CIRCUIT	MEMBERSHIP FIGURES RETURNED to CONFERENCE ⁸			
	1792	1802	1804	1815
RYE [Sussex Societies only] ⁹	85	214	154 ¹⁰	543
LEWES & BRIGHTON ¹¹	-	-	-	288
CHICHESTER ¹²	-	-	-	96
TOTAL	85	214	154	927

Notes

- 1792 was the first Conference after the death of John Wesley and the one before the start of the wars with France.
- 1802 was the year when the war between Britain and revolutionary France ended with the Treaty of Amiens.
- 1804 was the first year after the Militia Act, allowing Methodist soldiers to worship freely.
- 1815 was the first Conference after the end of the Napoleonic wars.

At the start of the war there was one circuit for Sussex which had 312 members, of whom only 85 were in societies in Sussex, as can be seen in Table 1. The circuit had five chapels, but only two of them were in Sussex: at Rye (1770) and Winchelsea (1785); the other three chapels were in Kent: Sevenoaks (1774), Tonbridge (1780) and Maidstone (1788).¹³ The national membership in 1792, excluding Ireland, was 61,265.¹⁴

By the time of the Conference of 1815 there were three circuits in Sussex: Chichester, Brighton, and Rye with a total of seven ministers and 927 members in the Sussex societies.¹⁵ The national membership, excluding Ireland, was 181,709.¹⁶ Myles gives only the eight chapels in the Rye

Circuit. For some reason he omitted completely the chapels at Brighton and Lewes, as well as any others in Sussex.¹⁷

This means that whilst the number of members nationally had risen almost threefold, the numbers in Sussex had risen by over three times more quickly. There would be no other period in Methodism in the nineteenth century when the increase in membership in Sussex would exceed the national increase by such an amount.

THE SPREAD OF METHODISM

There were three main ways in which Methodism spread: firstly, through the preaching of John Wesley and other ministers in the Church of England, such as his brother Charles; secondly, through the preaching of the assistants; thirdly, as a result of the arrival of individuals or families who brought their Methodism with them and shared it with their new neighbours.

There are examples of all three ways in the origins of Methodism in different parts of Sussex. Methodism first appeared in Sussex when one of Wesley's assistants, Thomas Mitchell, came to Rye in 1756 'where no Methodist had ever preached before' and set up a society.¹⁸ Wesley himself made 14 recorded visits to Sussex:¹⁹ the first was in October 1758 when, coming from the Isle of Wight, he took the coast road, stayed at Rottingdean on 9 October (but did not visit Brighton) and arrived at Rye on the following day.²⁰ After this visit a Sussex Circuit which 'embraced the whole county and also included parts of western Kent' was created, probably by 1759.²¹ This circuit was based on Rye and Wesley paid at least 12 visits to that town. Apart from the first occasion when he came along the coast, his route to Rye was via Sevenoaks or Shoreham in Kent where the vicar, Rev. Vincent Perronet, was a strong supporter.²²

Undoubtedly this is the major reason for the fact that by the end of the eighteenth century the Methodist societies in Sussex were in Rye and the surrounding villages and the villages on the Kent/Sussex borders.²³ This origin gave these societies a continued strength in the 19th century. Snell and Ell point out in *Rival Jerusalems*, their exhaustive study of the 'religious questions', in the 1851 Census, that '[Wesleyan Methodism] was strong ... along the Sussex-Kent border ...'.²⁴

An example of the third method, individual

activity, can be seen at Lewes where the first Methodists arrived in c. 1800 ‘[having come] from a distance’ as workers in a new paper-mill.²⁵

METHODISM AND THE ARMED FORCES

From the start of John Wesley’s mission he preached to soldiers and a number became members of Methodist societies. Leslie Church comments that, ‘[f]ew other classes of the community were as strongly attracted to Methodism as were soldiers’,²⁶ and gives examples of people such as ‘William Smith, a regimental bandmaster, quartered in Londonderry [who in 1790] was accepted on trial [as a travelling preacher]’.²⁷

There were problems however. Some officers disliked Methodism *per se*, thinking of Methodists as a potential threat. The Duke of Wellington had chaplains appointed ‘to combat the danger of Methodism ...’.²⁸ Others had a problem because Methodist soldiers objected to drilling on Sundays. In Jersey in 1798 such men offered to pay for a sergeant to drill them on weekdays stating that they would ‘turn out the same on Sunday ... when there was danger of invasion’. However, this was not enough and many of them were imprisoned.²⁹ Faced by the threat of revolutionary France many in Britain thought of the Methodists as potential revolutionaries and Jacobins.³⁰ The worst incident occurred in Gibraltar when five soldiers were court-martialled, and two of them flogged, for attending a prayer meeting on a Sunday.³¹ Following this incident the committee of the London Methodists persuaded the government to amend forthcoming legislation to give protection to Methodists, and others, in their Sunday observance.³² The 1803

Conference minuted its full approval of the actions of the London Methodists and, in its annual *Address ... to the Members of the Methodist Society throughout Great Britain*, published the relevant extracts, thereby ensuring that all Methodist ministers and societies knew of the new legal protection.³³ The new law included being excused from training on Sundays.³⁴ It is significant that the Methodist societies along the south coast did not begin until this legislation gave such protection to Methodist soldiers.

METHODIST SOLDIERS IN SUSSEX

The army was present in strength in Sussex from the start of the wars with France in 1793. For example, there were 14 regiments in the camp at Brighton in that year.³⁵ Some of these regiments would probably have included Methodists. Many soldiers married in Brighton: soldiers from ‘44 regular units and 27 units of county militia’ were married at the church of St Nicholas, Brighton, between 1754 and 1837, most of them between 1793 and 1815.³⁶ The regiment with the greatest number of such marriages in Brighton was the South Gloucestershire Militia with over 130 marriages in the period 1800–1815, of which 25 date from before 1804.³⁷ The next highest number of marriages for a militia regiment, other than the Sussex Militia, was that of the North Yorkshire Militia with 20 marriages between 1811 and 1813.³⁹ Both Yorkshire and Gloucestershire were Methodist strongholds.⁴⁰

From 1808 until 1815 the Wesleyan Conference included in its membership statistics the number of ‘non-resident’ members. The identification of ‘non-resident’ members with soldiers is clear from the ‘class lists’ in the *Lewes and Brighton General*

Table 2. ‘Non-resident’ members in Methodism 1808–1812.³⁸

CIRCUIT	1808			1809			1810			1811			1812		
	OM	NR	%												
Canterbury										418	12	3	398	14	3
Dover	132	36	21	181	26	13	208	16	7	170	18	10			
Lewes & Brighton				160	40	20	175	27	13	152	56	27	165	24	13
Rye	449	35	7				531	10	2	600	8	1	594	8	1
4-circuit total	581	71	12	341	66	16	914	53	6	1340	94	7	1157	46	4
National Total	1611	124	7	530	106	17	1515	107	7	3024	234	7	6943	365	5

Notes

OM Ordinary Members

NR Non-Resident Members

% The Percentage of Non-Resident Members in the overall total of Ordinary and Non-Resident Members.

Circuit Book.⁴¹ The non-resident figures refer to those Methodist members in the regular army or the militia. In 1808 there were two circuits in Sussex: Rye and 'Lewes and Brighton'.

Twenty-four different circuits nationally reported 'non-resident members' between 1808 and 1815.⁴² However, of these 24, 16 returned figures for one year only. Just four circuits returned figures for at least four of these eight years and these were all on the south coast: Canterbury, Dover, Rye, Lewes and Brighton. An analysis of these figures demonstrates the importance of the military in the founding of Methodist societies in Sussex.

In each of the three years from 1809-1811 the circuit with the highest percentage nationally of non-resident members was the 'Lewes and Brighton', a circuit that had been formed only in 1807.⁴³ Other neighbouring coastal circuits, such as 'Portsmouth', with 850 members in 1811, did not have a proportion of non-residents above 8%.⁴⁴

This does not mean that the non-residents in the Lewes and Brighton Circuit were necessarily in Brighton or Lewes in each year. 'The Lewes and Brighton General Circuit Book' shows that at times, e.g. in 1810, the majority (unnamed) were in Pevensey or Bexhill with none in Brighton.⁴⁵ The membership lists are given by society, e.g. 'Brighton', and then in class-lists headed with the name of the class-leader. Only in 1811 are the names of the non-residents given.

In the Rye Preachers' Book the names of the non-residents are given only for 1808 and 1810.⁴⁶ Unlike the Lewes and Brighton General Circuit Book, the Rye Preachers' Book gives the names of the regiments. A number of the names, including that of the class-leader, Joseph Parkin, at Brighton in 1810 and at Winchelsea in 1808, are the same. In *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen wrote of the attraction of the soldiers, especially the militia officers, at Brighton and she would have been interested to know that a 'Lydia Bennett' was indeed in the Methodist class at Winchelsea in 1808, with the North Yorkshire Militia.⁴⁷

THE BEGINNINGS OF METHODISM IN BRIGHTON

The Methodist societies in Brighton and in other Sussex coastal towns such as Eastbourne were founded neither by Wesley, nor by his assistants, nor by the efforts of Methodist families or individuals.⁴⁸ They had a different origin. As Swift

noted: "'Soldier evangelists" had a marked effect on the spread of Methodism in Sussex ...'.⁴⁹ This was recognized in the first of the 'official' Methodist histories to mention Brighton at all: writing in the latter half of the 19th century George Smith in his three-volume *History of Wesleyan Methodism*, referred to troops being moved from Winchester to Brighton.⁵⁰ He commented that, 'in this way Methodism was introduced into Brighton and Lewes at prayer meetings ... held by the soldiers in the barracks before any such meetings were known in the Town'.⁵¹ However, Smith places this event in the period of the War of American Independence. There is no other evidence for Methodist soldiers doing as Smith stated in Sussex during that war. He must have merged the two events.

We can look at the implantation of Methodism in Brighton, and see how it compares with other towns and whether it can be used as a model. There were indeed Methodists recorded in Brighton in 1804, two of them! One was Edward Beves. A carpenter from a strong Methodist family,⁵² he had arrived from Fareham in the late eighteenth century.⁵³ He married in 1795 and built up a business as a carpenter and builder.⁵⁴ At first he tried worshipping at 'the two or three Nonconformist Chapels', but finding 'their high Calvinistic doctrine ... very distasteful to him he decided to settle down and attend the old Parish Church'.⁵⁵

The second was William Mitchell, another Methodist carpenter, who in the autumn of 1804 arrived from Northampton via London, having had a revelation whilst working in London that he should go to Brighton.⁵⁶ On his arrival he 'began to enquire for the Methodists but was bitterly disappointed to find there were none in the town'.⁵⁷ At first he worshipped at the chapel of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion in North Street and from there formed a prayer group at his lodgings in Bond Street which was 'a great success [as] it was a new thing in the town and a number of young men and young women attended it (among the rest the young woman who afterwards became his wife)'.⁵⁸ However, the chapel leaders 'discovered that he was Methodist' and closed the prayer meeting.⁵⁹

The first two Methodists in Brighton, therefore, had tried the nonconformist chapels, including that of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, but in both cases were compelled to stop worshipping there as the theology was incompatible with

their own. They established no Methodist society themselves. The real founding of Brighton Methodism came later with the arrival of soldiers who included some Methodists.

There were several thousand soldiers stationed at Brighton at this period 'after harvest each year the numbers ... swelled from 7000 to 15,000 by the addition of the militia corps'.⁶⁰ The regiments stationed at Brighton, and at the cavalry barracks at Preston,⁶¹ included some Methodists in the North Yorkshire and South Gloucestershire Militias.⁶² In 1804 they 'established a prayer meeting in a cottage close to the barracks and also held a little Service there regularly'.⁶³ William Mitchell heard of this and he went to pray with them.⁶⁴ He was soon joined by Edward Beves, for whom he worked,⁶⁵ together with Beves's two elder sons, John (aged eight) and Edward (aged six). These visits were reciprocated by both the soldiers and their wives and a Methodist class of nine was formed from five Brighton families.⁶⁶ It included Edward Beves and his wife and William Mitchell and his wife, (William Mitchell married Eliza Williams, 26 December, 1804, so the first class meeting must be after that date).⁶⁷ It met first at the house of one of its members, a Mrs Smith of 2, Middle Street.⁶⁸ There was one other married couple, John and Sarah Pocock. Sarah, like William Mitchell, had worshipped at the Countess of Huntingdon's chapel, but we do not know about John.⁶⁹ They were soon joined by Samuel Akehurst and his wife, whose older children had been baptised at the Countess of Huntingdon's chapel.⁷⁰

At its founding the society must have been placed in the Sevenoaks Circuit, as were Eastbourne and Lewes. Preachers from both London and Sevenoaks came to Brighton,⁷¹ and in the spring of 1807 licences for worship at both Eastbourne and Lewes were taken out by Rev. Aaron Floyd, one of the ministers in the Sevenoaks Circuit.⁷²

The 1807 Conference made 'Lewes and Brighton' into a new 'mission circuit'.⁷³ Conference appointed two ministers: Rev. Robert Pilter (minister 1807–1809) as superintendent and Rev. William Homer (minister 1807–1808) as 'missionary', and the report on them to Conference was given by Dr Coke as part of the missionary report.⁷⁴ The Brighton society had already had plans for building a chapel at Dorset Gardens and had, through Samuel Akehurst, bought the land.⁷⁵

Dorset Gardens Wesleyan Methodist Chapel was

opened on 28 August 1808 and had 11 trustees.⁷⁶ Of these, four were from London, two from Lewes and five from Brighton.⁷⁷ Of the Brighton men, Akehurst, Beves, and Pocock were the founding non-military Methodist men, Mitchell was also a Trustee for the Lewes chapel and all four of them were Trustees for the Eastbourne chapel.⁷⁸ Of the two other Brighton Trustees for the Dorset Gardens Chapel, Henry Baker is presumably the same Captain Henry Baker (whether naval or military is not clear) who not only subscribed one pound to the first Chapel Fund, but also, on 12 July 1808, lent £100 to cover the building costs.⁷⁹ One of the other subscribers was a Sergeant Pye who gave £1 1s in 1808.⁸⁰ The other trustee from Brighton was William Tattersall/Tattersall whose surname is far more common in the north than in Sussex. The surname distribution for the 1881 Census gives over 4000 in total for Tattersall, of whom over 3800 were in Lancashire or Yorkshire and only one on Sussex,⁸¹ although there are a number of Tattersall marriages in Sussex.⁸²

The Dorset Gardens' baptismal register for 1808–1823 was used as the circuit book and recorded baptisms from as far afield as Groombridge, Hastings and Lewes, as well as Brighton.⁸³ There were 46 baptisms at Brighton between 1808 and the battle of Waterloo in 1815. No paternal occupation is given for any except that for George Watson of the North Yorkshire Militia, who had a daughter baptised in 1811. However, some other fathers can be assumed to have a military background. For example, Joseph Parkin, who was the class leader for the class of North Yorkshire Militia at Winchelsea in 1808 and for the soldiers' class at Brighton in 1811 is presumably the Joseph Parkin who married Elizabeth Pocock in 1813 and who had a daughter baptised in 1814.⁸⁴ John Herbert, who was the oldest person to be baptised at this time, being 25 at baptism in 1813, was born at Horsley in Gloucestershire and may well have been in the South Gloucestershire Militia.

Another Brighton Methodist who may well have been in the North Yorkshire Militia was the Thomas Marsden who was part of the North Yorkshire Militia class at Rye in 1808,⁸⁵ and is probably the same Thomas Marsden who married Frances Wisden at Brighton in 1817, almost the only Marsden to have married in Sussex before 1837.⁸⁶ A Mr Marsden played the bass viol in the orchestra at Dorset Gardens in the 1820s.⁸⁷

The soldiers made an impression on Methodism in Brighton in another way. In *The Churches of Brighton*, Sawyer states that he was given much information about the period from c. 1820 by 'a gentleman' who remembered that, when a boy of about nine, 'from time to time a number of soldiers used to attend at Dorset Gardens Chapel, and on one occasion, when the Life Guards were ... at Brighton, some of them used to be present every Sunday ... who used to shout "Amen!" "Glory!" and similar expressions with such energy that we boys were nearly frightened'.⁸⁸

It was noted by contemporaries that the Methodist society at Brighton was both small and slow to increase. Rev. Joseph Benson, one of the leading Methodists of the day, who opened the chapel at Dorset Gardens in 1808, 'feared [that] we should not have a tolerable congregation' on that occasion.⁸⁹ His fears turned out to be unjustified,⁹⁰ but Coke in his report to the 1811 Conference stated that: 'It does not appear that the Mission in the vicinity of Brighthelmstone, in Sussex, is so prosperous as some we have mentioned, though even here our missionaries have not laboured in vain.'⁹¹

The *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, in an article written about the extension of the chapel in 1823, quotes the then minister, Rev. William Lord (Superintendent Minister, 1821–1824) '[f]or several years the congregations were small, the Society few in number, and their discouragements many.'⁹² The small number was also commented upon by one of the earliest ministers in Brighton, Rev. Richard Robarts (Minister, 1808–1809), who noted in his Journal on his arrival in Brighton, 'The people gave me a very kind reception, though they were few in number, and most of them young Methodists'.⁹³ By 'young Methodists', Robarts meant that they were new to the church.

One of the discouragements referred to by Lord would have been the failure to develop a society at Patcham in spite of having in 1810 obtained a certificate for worship there.⁹⁴ Another would have been not only the slow growth in the number of members, from 33 in 1809 to only 63 in 1815, but also the turnover of these members.⁹⁵ In each of these years the turnover was very great, being at least 60% in each year and as high as 74% in 1814. This shows that the society could attract a few members but then lost them. This may have been partly because the population of Brighton was growing with great speed at this time — it was

the fastest growing town in the country between 1811 and 1821,⁹⁶ but also because of 'the removal of several members to other circuits'.⁹⁷

The Methodist society at Brighton started after prospective Methodist members joined a group of Methodist soldiers who held a regular prayer meeting. The initial growth, to 1815, was slow. Some of the soldiers gave or lent money to the society to build its new chapel and were involved in its life and worship.

SOLDIERS AND THE BEGINNINGS OF METHODISM IN OTHER SUSSEX TOWNS

The early ministers in the Lewes and Brighton Circuit realized that it was a 'complete missionary field' very large indeed, being 'over sixty miles in length and thirty in breadth'.⁹⁸ Starting from the west and moving east, the first society that survived was that in Chichester, where a local schoolmaster, William Phillips, applied for a licence to have a meeting-place on 24 July 1804.⁹⁹ However Phillips was not alone. There was 'another pioneer, Thomas Riley, a sergeant-major in the 7th Dragoon Guards stationed in Chichester'; Riley's preaching converted William Ball who became a leading member of the society.¹⁰⁰

There is no evidence for the presence or absence of soldiers in the founding of the society at Arundel where a room was registered as a meeting place in 1807.¹⁰¹ However, in Littlehampton Methodism came through the presence of the troops and a sergeant and men from a regiment stationed nearby held services using the drum head as a reading desk.¹⁰²

By 1811 a society is mentioned at both Worthing (9 members) and Sompting (21 members) but both societies 'soon lapsed', and there is no indication of military involvement.¹⁰³

There was a society at Shoreham by 1807 and Norman Davies in *The Saints Before - A History of the Shoreham Society of Methodists and their Wesley Church* speculates that 'local maritime activity - involving movement of sailors and merchants ...' might have led to an awareness of Methodism in the local population. However, he adduces no evidence for this.¹⁰⁴

A house in Southwick was registered for Methodist worship in 1807 and a Meeting House registered there by Rev. Robert Pilter in 1808.

Robarts recorded that he and Pilter walked to Southwick on a Thursday in February, 1809,¹⁰⁵ presumably to preach or meet potential Methodists, but no society was recorded there before 1858.¹⁰⁶

There are two sources for the establishment of Methodism in Lewes, both from outside the area. A paper-mill was opened in about 1800: 'many of these [workers] were Methodist ...'.¹⁰⁷ They began to worship in a room that had been used as a wool-store. There were soldiers in the barracks at Lewes and about 'a dozen [were] Methodist'.¹⁰⁸ The registration for the first place of Methodist worship in Lewes was taken out by Joseph Parker in September 1806.¹⁰⁹ Parker 'was a bugler in a regiment stationed at Eastbourne ... [who] stayed and became a local preacher ...'.¹¹⁰ Swift thinks of Parker as 'the recognised leader of the infant Lewes society ...'.¹¹¹ The dependence of the Lewes society on outsiders can be seen from the list of trustees. Brent points out that none of the 11 was originally from Lewes and that they included William Baxter who was a barrack-sergeant,¹¹² possibly the same as the 'Mr Baxter' of Lewes who became the first Circuit Steward for the Lewes and Brighton Circuit in October 1807.¹¹³

The origins of Methodism in Eastbourne have been discussed by more writers than in any other town in Sussex with the possible exception of Brighton,¹¹⁴ and especially by Dr Dunn-Wilson who reviews all the available evidence and concludes that it was 'the soldiers [who] began Methodist meetings in the [area]' and that they 'made provision for the continuance of Methodist witness [without which] it must surely have died shortly after its birth'.¹¹⁵ The date of the first Methodist witness in Eastbourne is difficult to ascertain, but by May 1807 'a room of Mr Simpson's' was registered as a place for Methodist worship.¹¹⁶ However, the society is normally dated to late 1803 with the arrival of the first Methodist soldiers, from the North Yorkshire militia.¹¹⁷ The ending of the Napoleonic wars and the consequent departure of the soldiers had a damaging impact both on the economy of Eastbourne and on the Methodist society; one of its leaders, Henry Beck, moved to Hastings in 1817. The society had to be helped by the circuit.¹¹⁸

Further along the coast there were 11 soldiers recorded as 'non-resident' members at Pevensy in 1810. Bexhill had 23 in 1809¹¹⁹ and 18 in 1810.¹²⁰ Pevensy recorded no Methodist members but a place of worship was registered at Bexhill in

December 1808¹²¹ and Robarts preached to 'a large congregation at Bexhill' in January 1809.¹²²

Once Hastings is reached the situation changes. The first place of Methodist worship in Hastings was registered in 1797.¹²³ Methodist influence in Hastings and towns to the east came first from the Rye circuit,¹²⁴ which had its own origins in the activities of John Wesley. However in Hastings until 1817 the opposition from the local clergyman, amongst other things, meant that when Henry Beck arrived there from Eastbourne in that year 'he was the only Methodist in the town.'¹²⁵ The Rye Circuit recorded no society at either Bexhill or Hastings in the period before 1815.¹²⁶

Beyond Hastings, both Winchelsea and Rye date from Wesley's visits although no doubt the small society at Winchelsea, only 10 in 1802, benefited from 17 members of the North Yorkshire militia who were recorded as non-resident in 1808. However, by 1811 the number of members had declined to six.¹²⁷

CONCLUSION

At the start of this article I quoted Caplan who noted that the year 1803 was of significance, although he did not state why. He also commented that Methodism had not penetrated Sussex save for those areas visited by John Wesley. This feature of Sussex Methodism was also noted by others such as Smith and Swift.

It has become clear that in 1802, at the time of the Treaty of Amiens, the majority of towns on the Sussex coast between Chichester and Hastings had only potential Methodists or 'Methodists in waiting' as it were. Following the liberalisation of the law in 1803, soldiers in the regular army or the militia were free to meet for prayer and worship on Sundays wherever they happened to be. These soldier Methodists also wished to spread their message and with the return of the army to the south coast to defend against a possible Napoleonic invasion they took this new opportunity. Their unique role in Sussex is recognized in the membership returns to the Methodist Conference where an analysis of the numbers and distribution of 'non-residents' or 'soldier members' shows their disproportionate numerical status compared with the rest of the country.

As a result, places like Chichester and Lewes, where there were nascent societies, had those

societies supported and enhanced by the arrival of Methodist soldiers, some of whom, like Baxter and Parker in Lewes, became leading members of them.

In other towns, like Brighton and Eastbourne where there were potential societies, the Methodist soldiers acted as the catalyst for the creation of Methodist societies. Again, some of the soldiers provided leadership as well as finance.

In some of the smaller places, like Littlehampton and Shoreham, the new society was unable to survive the disappearance of the soldiers, and had to wait for the larger societies in the area to spread their work. The society in Eastbourne, a town which suffered an economic decline after the

Napoleonic wars, survived through help from the larger societies in Brighton and Lewes.

Nationally the Wesleyan Methodist Conference recognised the potential in 1807 when it created some of the earliest specific mission fields, and new circuits which in the succeeding decades took the Methodist message to central Sussex. Sussex, however, has never been a stronghold of Methodism. The reason may lie partly in Sussex Methodism's very unusual origins, because the Methodist churches here owe their foundation more to the British response to Napoleon than to the actions of John Wesley or to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference.

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NOTES

- ¹ N. Caplan, 'A History of Dissent in Sussex', (Typescript in the Library of the Sussex Archaeological Society) - Book 4, 66.
- ² W. W. Pocock, 'A Sketch of the History of Wesleyan-Methodism in Some of the Southern Counties of England', (Wesleyan Methodist Book-Room, 1885): introduction by Rev. Dr J. H. Rigg, 5.
- ³ R. C. Swift, 'Methodism in Sussex - and its influence in the life of the community 1756-1900', unpublished M.A. thesis, 1984, (hereafter Swift), 6-7.
- ⁴ J. Goring, *Burn Holy Fire - Religion in Lewes since the Reformation*, (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press 2003), 90. It is clear that people in Lewes used the term 'Methodist' for followers of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.
- ⁵ J. Vickers, *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (hereafter *Dictionary of Methodism*), (Peterborough: Epworth, 2000). See articles on 'Circuit' 68: 'Class Meeting', 69-70: 'Conference', 75-6: 'Itinerancy', 179.
- ⁶ R. Currie, A. Gilbert, L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers - Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 170*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 12.
- ⁷ Currie, Gilbert and Horsley, 12.
- ⁸ *Minutes of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference* (hereafter *Minutes*), 1744-1843, published in nine volumes, (John Mason, 1812-1843), Vols 1, 2, and 4.
- ⁹ Figures extracted from East Sussex Record Office (hereafter ESRO) NMA 4/1/1 which contains an 'Account of the Societies in the Sussex Circuit'; NMA 4/1/2: Preachers' Circuit Book - Rye Circuit. With a few exceptions, these books give the names of all members in all classes in each society in the circuit for most years. Most members lived in societies in Kent.
- ¹⁰ The Rye circuit was divided and many Kent societies were placed in the Sevenoaks Circuit. There is the possibility that some Sussex societies were also placed in the Sevenoaks Circuit.
- ¹¹ *Minutes*, Vol. 4, 1815.
- ¹² *Minutes*, Vol. 4, 1815.
- ¹³ Swift 30. Swift is using W. Myles, *A chronological history of the people called Methodists, of the connexion of the late Rev. John Wesley, from their rise in the year 1729 to their last Conference in 1812*, (Wesleyan Conference Office, London, 4th edition, 1813).
- ¹⁴ *Minutes* Vol. 1, 1792.
- ¹⁵ *Minutes* Vol. 4, 1815.
- ¹⁶ *Minutes* Vol. 4, 1815.
- ¹⁷ Myles, 437.
- ¹⁸ T. Jackson (ed.), 'The Life of Mr Thomas Mitchell' in *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, (Wesleyan Conference Office, London, 4th edition, 1871-1872), Vol. 1, 254.
- ¹⁹ The number fourteen is stated by Swift 29. I can find only twelve occasions recorded in N. Curnock (ed.), *John Wesley's Journal* (hereafter *JWJ*), standard edition (London: Charles Kelly, 1909-1916).
- ²⁰ *JWJ* vol. 4, 288.
- ²¹ This is Swift's conclusion, see Swift 5.
- ²² For example in 1767, *JWJ* Vol. 6, 217-18, and in 1784 *JWJ* Vol. 7, 37.
- ²³ Swift, 19 and 29 for the figures of the societies.
- ²⁴ K. D. M. Snell and P. S. Ell, *Rival Jerusalems - The Geography of Victorian Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126.
- ²⁵ ESRO ACC 3777/2. This is an unpaginated manuscript account of 19th-century Wesleyan Methodism in Brighton compiled by William Beves, probably the grandson rather than the son of Edward Beves.
- ²⁶ L. Church, *More about early Methodist People* (London: Epworth, 1949), 11.
- ²⁷ Church, 24.
- ²⁸ Swift, 37, he is quoting John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 113
- ²⁹ Church, 25. He quotes from a letter from Wilberforce to William Wickham, Under-Secretary of State, 12 September, 1798.
- ³⁰ B. Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (London, Heinemann: 1974) 125-6.
- ³¹ O. S. Watkins, *Soldiers and Preachers Too* (London: Charles Kelly, 1906), 57-8. Two of those convicted were corporals who were demoted and given 200 lashes each. This event is still remembered, see D. Wilkes, 'Shaping

- the way the army behaves', *Methodist Recorder* Thursday, 29 July 2004.
- ³² Myles, 296.
- ³³ *Minutes* Vol. 2, 1803, 190–93, published 30 July, 1803.
- ³⁴ *Minutes* Vol. 2, 1803, 192. The changes were also published in the *Methodist Magazine*, 1803; (The *Methodist Magazine* later became the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*).
- ³⁵ R. C. Grant, *The Brighton Garrison 1793–1900* (Brighton: Layman's, n.d.), 13.
- ³⁶ L. Suggars and A. F. Leeson, 'Military marriages in Brighton in Napoleonic times', *Sussex Family Historian* (hereafter *SFH*), 1, no. 4, 88.
- ³⁷ Suggars and Leeson, 'Military marriages in Brighton in Napoleonic times', *SFH* 1, no. 4, 92.
- ³⁸ All Figures from *Minutes* Vol. 2, 1808–812.
- ³⁹ Suggars and Leeson, *SFH* 1, no. 4, 96.
- ⁴⁰ Snell and Ell, 124 and 126.
- ⁴¹ ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1, Lewes and Brighton General Circuit Book, by 1825 Lewes, Eastbourne etc., had become a separate circuit and the book contains records of the Brighton Circuit only.
- ⁴² *Minutes* Vol. 3, 1808–1813, Vol. 4 1814–1818. All membership statistics in this and the next paragraph are taken from these Minutes.
- ⁴³ *Minutes* Vol. 2, 1807.
- ⁴⁴ *Minutes* Vol. 2, 1811.
- ⁴⁵ ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1.
- ⁴⁶ ESRO NMA 4/1/2.
- ⁴⁷ ESRO NMA 4/1/2.
- ⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the standard works on the history of Brighton do not refer to Methodism, let alone to its origin in the town. For example, Anthony Dale, *Brighton Churches* (Routledge, 1989); *Brighton Town and Brighton People* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1976); *Fashionable Brighton* (London: Oriel, 2nd edition, 1967); Ken Fines, *A History of Brighton and Hove - Stone-Age Whitehawk to Millennium City* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2002); Edmund Gilbert, *Brighton - Old Ocean's Bauble* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1975); Lewis Melville, *Brighton, Its History, its Follies, and its Fashions* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1909) and Clifford Musgrave, *Life in Brighton* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970). Directories and guides, such as, *Baxter's New Brighton Directory* (Baxter, 1824) start only in the 1820s and refer, e.g. Baxter, pp. 55–6, to the building of Dorset Gardens chapel in 1808 and to such matters as its times of service; J. A. Erredge, *A History of Brighthelmstone — the Ancient and Modern History of Brighton* (Brighton: Lewis, 1862).
- ⁴⁹ Swift, 39.
- ⁵⁰ All the earlier histories of Methodism, such as Myles, *A Chronological History*, and J. Crowther, *A Portraiture of Methodism* (London, Richard Edwards, 1815) ignore Brighton completely even though Myles includes the societies at Rye and Staplecross in his list of chapels in Sussex in 1812 and the chapel at Brighton had been open for four years.
- ⁵¹ G. Smith, *A History of Wesleyan Methodism*, Vol. 1. (London, Longman, 1859, 2nd ed.) 445.
- ⁵² ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁵³ E. Griffin, *A Pilgrim People — The Story of Methodism in Brighton, Hove and District* (Hove, 1957), 9. Griffin follows ESRO Acc. Num. 3777/2, *Brighton & Hove Circuit*, and gives 1780 as the year of Edward Beves' arrival in Brighton; however 1790 was the far more likely date.
- ⁵⁴ ESRO PAR 255/1/1/9, Parish Register of St Nicholas, Brighton, Edward Beves married Mary May, by licence, 13 December, 1795; he is termed 'builder' both in *Pigot's Directory*, 1823, and in M. Strong, 'Brighton Mechanics' Institute Members & Donors 1825–1828', *SFH* 12, no. 7, 251–5. In this latter list he is, apart from four other members of his family, the only one whom I can definitely identify as a Wesleyan Methodist.
- ⁵⁵ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁵⁶ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁵⁷ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁵⁸ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁵⁹ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁶⁰ Suggars and Leeson, *SFH* 1, no. 4, 88.
- ⁶¹ Which by June 1803 had accommodation for 670 cavalry. A. Hudson, 'Gazetteer of Barracks in Sussex during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1793–1815)', 1986, 10: copy at ESRO ACC 3942.
- ⁶² ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁶³ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁶⁴ ESRO ACC 3777/2. In ESRO NMB 48/9/5. J. L. Wright, *Dorset Gardens and the Dome* (Brighton n.d.) states, 2, that 'the class linked with the little group of soldiers at the new Cavalry Barracks'. This is an understandable confusion but the wrong way round.
- ⁶⁵ *Dictionary of Methodism*, 'Brighton', 43.
- ⁶⁶ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁶⁷ Sussex Marriage Index, (Sussex Family History Group, 2004).
- ⁶⁸ Griffin *Pilgrim People*, 9, states that they 'met at the house of Mr J. Pocock in Middle Street'. In this he is followed by Swift, 41, who cites ESRO NMA/3/6/3 'Notes on Early Methodism in Brighton'. However this document, now catalogued as ESRO NMA 3/9/3 and actually headed 'Brighton Methodism', states clearly that the first class was held at Mrs Smith's house. This is confirmed in ESRO ACC 3777/2. I think that Swift must have unwittingly followed Griffin at this point. Griffin in turn probably followed J. Sawyer, *The Churches of Brighton - Descriptive Sketches of the Past History and Present Characteristics with Outlines of Sermons* (London, n.d. but probably 1882) Vol. 1, 69. Sawyer was careful and stated that 'the first Class Meeting is said to have been held ... at the house of Mr John Pocock'.
- ⁶⁹ Obituary of Sarah Pocock, *WMM* 1855, 968. The obituary implies that the Society was formed after the visit of the first Methodist minister in 1806. This is an error.
- ⁷⁰ ESRO NH 1.4.1. The Akehursts' first five children were baptised at the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, their next seven as Wesleyan Methodists, Charlotte being baptised before Dorset Gardens had been opened in 1808.
- ⁷¹ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ⁷² N. Caplan, 'Copies of Toleration Act Registrations in the General Register Office', (hereafter 'Registrations 1773–1809') West Sussex Record Office (hereafter WSRO), MP 187, 'Copies of Toleration Act Registrations Minutes', Vol. 2, 1806.
- ⁷³ *Minutes* Vol. 2, 1807.
- ⁷⁴ Pocock, 37: he quotes from Coke's report of 1811.

- ⁷⁵ ESRO ACC 8783/1, Memorandum of Agreement of Samuel Akehurst. This document, together with a number of others was discovered by Rev. Cynthia Park and Mr Michael Hickman only on 22 April 2003 at the back of the Dorset Gardens Circuit Safe at the time of its replacement in the new Dorset Gardens Church.
- ⁷⁶ James MacDonald, *Memoirs of Rev. Joseph Benson*, (London, 1822), 427.
- ⁷⁷ ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1.
- ⁷⁸ ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1'.
- ⁷⁹ ESRO NMB 48/2/1/1.
- ⁸⁰ ESRO NMB 48/2/1/1.
- ⁸¹ *The British 19th Century Surname Atlas*, (Archer Software, 2003).
- ⁸² *The Sussex Marriage Index*.
- ⁸³ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), RG 4/2941, 'Baptismal Register of Dorset Gardens Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1808-1822'. All baptismal dates in this paragraph come from this book.
- ⁸⁴ ESRO NMA 4/1/2; ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1; The Sussex Marriage Index.
- ⁸⁵ ESRO NMA 4/1/2.
- ⁸⁶ Sussex Marriage Index.
- ⁸⁷ Sawyer, 72.
- ⁸⁸ Sawyer, 72.
- ⁸⁹ *Dictionary of Methodism*, 'Benson', 28.
- ⁹⁰ MacDonald, 427.
- ⁹¹ Pocock, 36.
- ⁹² WMM 1823, 823.
- ⁹³ W. Toase, *The Memoirs of the Rev. Richard Robarts* (Guernsey, 1820), 82.
- ⁹⁴ ESRO ACC 8783/2. *Certificate for a place of Worship at Patcham*. As far as I can ascertain, until the Certificate was discovered in 2003 it had not been known since the deposit of the certificate in the circuit safe that any attempt had been made to worship in Patcham at this time. See note 75 above.
- ⁹⁵ ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1.
- ⁹⁶ S. Farrant, 'The early growth of the seaside resorts, c. 1750 to 1840', in *Sussex: Environment, Landscape and Society* (Alan Sutton, 1983), 213; Toase, *Robarts Memoirs*, 82.
- ⁹⁷ Toase, *Robarts Memoirs*, 81.
- ⁹⁸ Toase, *Robarts Memoirs*, 82.
- ⁹⁹ J. and H. Vickers (hereafter Vickers), *Methodism in a Cathedral City - Southgate Methodist Church, Chichester, 1877-1977* (Chichester: 1977), 2.
- ¹⁰⁰ J. and H. Vickers, 3.
- ¹⁰¹ Swift, 44.
- ¹⁰² Swift, 42.
- ¹⁰³ E. Griffin, *The Widening Way, The Story of Methodism in Worthing, Shoreham and District* (Worthing, 1970), 10.
- ¹⁰⁴ N. Davies, *The Saints Before - A History of the Shoreham Society of Methodists and their Wesley Church* (Shoreham-by-sea, 1990), 9.
- ¹⁰⁵ Toase, *Robarts Memoirs*, 85.
- ¹⁰⁶ Griffin, *Pilgrim People*, 16.
- ¹⁰⁷ ESRO ACC 3777/2.
- ¹⁰⁸ Swift, 39, states that the soldiers were quartered at Ringmer but gives no source for this statement. ESRO ACC 3777/2, states that they were in the barracks at Lewes and gives their number.
- ¹⁰⁹ WSRO MP 187, Copies of Toleration Act Registrations.
- ¹¹⁰ *The Watchman and Wesleyan Advertiser*, 6 July, 1864 (hereafter *Watchman*), reporting on the opening of the Eastbourne Chapel and an address given by Henry Beck who had been one of the founders both in Eastbourne and Hastings.
- ¹¹¹ Swift, 39
- ¹¹² C. Brent, *Georgian Lewes 1714-1830: The Heyday of a County Town*, (Lewes, Brent, 1993), 165.
- ¹¹³ ESRO NMA 5/2/1.
- ¹¹⁴ For example: C. Crisford, *A Golden Candlestick or Methodism in Eastbourne* (Eastbourne, 1913), pp. 17-31; D. Dunn-Wilson, 'From Seahouses to Central - A Short Account of 'The People Called Methodist' in Eastbourne (Eastbourne, 1978), pp. 5-20; G. Neville, *Religion and Society in Eastbourne 1735-1920*, (Eastbourne Local History Society, 1982), pp. 4-5; Anon, *175 Years of Methodism in Eastbourne, 1803-1978* (Eastbourne, 1978), pp. 1-2.
- ¹¹⁵ Dunn-Wilson, 11.
- ¹¹⁶ WSRO MP 187, 'Copies of Toleration Act Registrations'; Dunn-Wilson, p 6, gives 1810, which is the date of the first Methodist chapel in Eastbourne. He may have been unaware of Caplan's work.
- ¹¹⁷ *Watchman*, 6 July 1864.
- ¹¹⁸ Dunn-Wilson pp. 18-19.
- ¹¹⁹ L. J. Bartley, *The Story of Bexhill* (Bexhill-on-Sea, Parsons, 1971), states, p. 76, that the 23 were 'local members including coastguards'. The 23 names in the Lewes and Brighton General Circuit Book, ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1 are followed by the words '23 Non Residents' implying, as with the other entries, an overall total. There are 20 men and three women. Two of the women have the same surnames as a man in the names above, in other words almost definitely a married couple. I think that Bartley is incorrect to think of them as 'local', they were soldiers and their wives.
- ¹²⁰ ESRO NMA 5/1/1/1.
- ¹²¹ WSRO MP 187.
- ¹²² Toase, *Robarts' Memoirs*, 85.
- ¹²³ N. Caplan, *A History of Dissent in Sussex*, Book IV, 47.
- ¹²⁴ WMM, 1843, 531.
- ¹²⁵ No author, *Hastings & St. Leonards Wesleyan Methodist Centenary - History & Souvenir 1821-1921* (Hastings, 1921), 3.
- ¹²⁶ ESRO NMA 4/1/1, 4/1/2.
- ¹²⁷ ESRO NMA 4/1/2.