

The stronghold of Methodism

a survey of chapels in Cornwall

by Jeremy Lake, Jo Cox & Eric Berry

This article aims to explore some of the topics arising from a thematic listing survey of Nonconformist chapels in Cornwall. The factors underlining the abundance and distribution, particularly of chapels of Methodist origin, are explored. An understanding of the potential and limitations of documentary and physical evidence is essential to the recording process. It is important to determine how the dynamics of the New Dissent, most notably Methodism, and the processes of funding, schism and revival, have determined the planning, scale, architecture and archaeology of chapel buildings. This survey has highlighted the distinctiveness of our Nonconformist heritage, the processes at work behind its architectural diversity, the high rate of alteration and remodelling, and our own perceptions of its importance as a historical record.

The Nonconformist history of Cornwall, seen particularly in the impact and development of Methodism, is highly distinctive. Cornish Methodism, with its strongholds in the centre and west of the county, found few national parallels – with the exception of the mining valleys of south Wales – for the dominance which it held over other forms of Christian worship. This article explores some of the themes arising from a thematic listing survey of Nonconformist chapels in Cornwall which originated in the mutual concern of English Heritage and the Methodist Church. The large increase in the number of chapels listed for their special architectural and historic interest since the early 1980s has coincided with a period of considerable change. While many churches flourish in the towns of Cornwall, the countryside has witnessed a serious decline, with many chapels becoming redundant. In framing its pastoral strategies to meet these and other changing circumstances, the Methodist Church needs clear guidance about how listing might affect its ability to alter, extend or even demolish its properties.

During the same period English Heritage has become more aware of the need to reassess critically the stock of listed chapels and develop a constructive dialogue with churches, local authorities and other potential users, based upon accurate information on the importance of chapels and their fittings. The limited initial brief was to select a sample of listed chapels for inspection, but it quickly became apparent that this would not produce a consistent and up-to-date evaluation. Any reliable assessment has to be based upon knowledge of the whole resource, using secondary sources – principally the Royal Commission's inventory of Nonconformist chapels (Stell 1991) and chapels marked on Ordnance Survey maps – as a basis for a rapid fieldwork programme and the compilation of a photographic archive. Eric Berry undertook this survey and Dr Jo Cox researched selected areas of primary documentation. As a result of their work, we now have the

basis for a critical overview of these chapels for the first time.

There is not sufficient space to discuss here all the significant strands which relate to the history of these chapels and the selection and conservation of the finest examples. These will form the subject of a separate publication. We will concentrate here on how the dynamics of Methodism in particular have affected the planning, design and archaeology of chapel buildings.

Historical background

The abundance and distribution of chapels in the county bears a direct relationship to its social and economic history, sense of distinct cultural identity and the importance of both within a national context. In 1830, the Vicar of Crowan's statement that 'we have lost the people. The religion of the mass is become Wesleyan Methodism' (Brown 1945, 147) uncannily echoed the words of a celebrated Anglican churchman, Dr Walter Farquar Hook, who, in surveying the state of his own parish in 1837, observed that 'the established religion in Leeds is Methodism'. The Census Returns for 1851, over one hundred years after the birth of Methodism, show that Nonconformity was strongest in Cornwall and areas of the north. Here the ministry of the established Anglican church was weak owing to the historically large size of parishes, combined with rising population and expanding industries, absentee clergy and an inflexible Anglican organisation. Allowing for factors such as the deliberate failure by some Anglican churches to submit returns (see Orme 1991, 37–44 for an analysis of the Census), the statistics show that Cornwall surpassed the national average for church attendances and had the highest percentage of Nonconformist places of worship in England (76% as compared with an average of 59.2%). Of the 241,494 worshippers recorded on Census Sunday, 154,705 attended

places of Wesleyan Methodist origin (including the breakaway groups, of which the Bible Christians were the most numerous). The highest single percentage of Nonconformist places of worship was 79.6% for the Camborne/Redruth district (also the area where surviving chapels are concentrated in greatest numbers). This area was the centre of the mining industry in Cornwall and the world centre of tin mining for much of the 19th century. Other areas with unusually high numbers of chapels are Calstock in the east and St Just in the extreme west (also mining areas) and Penzance, which was more dependant on the fishing industry.

The settlements that Wesley and his successors found in the county were small towns, coastal communities involved in fishing and trade, scattered rural settlements (with a class of small and independent tenant farmers who inhibited the emergence of a strong local gentry) and the extraordinary, ever-changing, rural industrial communities. These ranged from thousands of miners – Dolcoath mine in Camborne employed 1600 people in 1806 – to far smaller mining and quarrying concerns. Mining continued to draw an expanding population into new areas, leaving the medieval Anglican churches founded in regions of nucleated settlement, ineffective and stranded. Chesher (1981, 8–9) notes that the population of St Blazey rose by 300% between 1800 and 1830, St Cleer trebled between 1830 and 1860 and St Austell doubled between 1800 and 1850. In 1800, Tuckingmill had no church, but it supported a Methodist society of 459 members and boasted a chapel capable of accommodating 1200 hearers. An Anglican church was not built at Tuckingmill until 45 years later (Brown 1945, 122). The parish of Illogan, which had experienced similar demographic upheaval in the first half of the 19th century and had three tin mines in 1800, boasted 14 chapels by 1840. Many of these had been built after revivals, particularly that of 1831, while division accounted for others. The nine chapels built after 1850 were all placed close to the Wesleyan chapels from which they had obtained their membership.

The pattern of organisation of Methodism in Cornwall encouraged more local control than was common in other areas. Redruth, for example, gained some national notoriety by pressing for more local democracy shortly after Wesley's death in 1791. There was also a markedly low ratio of ministers to people compared with other parts of the country, and the strong tradition of local preachers resulted in some, like the Bible Christian Billy Bray (1794–1868), achieving the status of folk heroes. The high rate of both Cornish division and revival also ruffled the feathers of Conference, the governing body of Wesleyan Methodism after 1784, and contributed to the perception that Wesleyan Methodism in the county appeared to be out of Conference control. Both Ward and Luker have argued that the Cornish translated Methodism into a true folk religion

(Ward 1972; Luker 1986). This survived until external factors – the decline of metal mining (an estimated one third of the mining population left the county between 1871 and 1881) and the opening up of the county to influences east of the Tamar – rendered it more like Methodism elsewhere.

If the Religious Census gives some idea of attendance in places of worship on Census Sunday, the broader impact of Methodism on the character and life of Cornwall should not be underestimated. It can be identified in social life, education, philanthropy and politics. Methodism undoubtedly also influenced Cornish commerce and business, as personal contacts forged in the local societies extended into economic life, although to date this is an under-researched area.

Interpretation

A proper understanding of the potential and limitations of documentary sources is, of course, an essential preliminary step in the evaluation and recording of surviving fabric. The level of documentary information that survives for Wesleyan Methodism is immense, but scarcity of sources dealing with the numerous secessions and offshoots can create an imbalance in understanding the whole picture. The historiography of Methodist chapels is very different from Anglican churches. In Methodist language, the term 'chapel' stood (with biblical authority) not only for the building, or group of buildings which might incorporate a host of different functions, but also for the members of the Society which used it. Chapel histories, unlike architectural guidebooks of parish churches, tend to combine a history of the Society and its notable members with a very limited history of its buildings. In fact Methodist buildings as architecture are relatively poorly documented in contrast to Anglican churches in the same period. The administrative procedures of the Anglican church, enshrined in Vestry Committee minutes or the later Faculty Petition system (imperfect though it was), mean that the names of architects and often contractors for parish churches can be found for restoration, enlargement or new-build schemes and, in many cases, the precise changes that took place can be identified in words and, most usefully, in architects' drawings. By comparison there is a lack of surviving 19th century design drawings for Methodist chapels.

Documents can be useful in identifying proposals for a particular building programme, or, in the shape of accounts, the monthly outgoings on a building or enlargement scheme, but one can never be confident that the work carried out on a building was fully recorded on paper, and has survived. The buildings themselves must be examined to elucidate building sequence, and here there are real difficulties for any building historian. There can be no doubt that chapels were remodelled and rebuilt with great

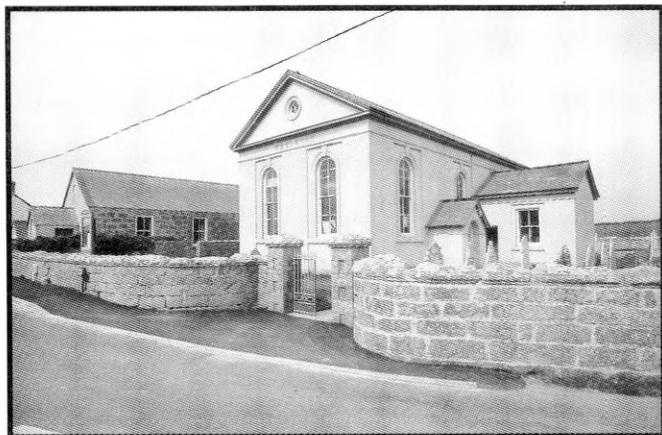


Fig 1 Little Trethewey, St Levan dates from 1868 and is part of the best-preserved wayside chapel group in Cornwall, with its detached schoolroom, burial ground walls and manse. The rectangular plan, with its end gallery, allowed for a later 19th century extension under the same roof at the choir end (Photo: E Berry)

frequency and that recycling building materials and fittings, sometimes from a previous chapel on the site, was common practice. The 1841 Wesleyan Methodist chapel at Liskeard incorporated details of the old Dean Street Chapel, apparently transferring dry rot from the old building to the new (Bolitho 1967, 21–2).

Frequent rebuilding and reuse of fabric and fittings may be the norm for chapels everywhere, as compared to parish churches, but the sequence of revivals in Cornwall made requirements for the number of sittings change swiftly at different periods. A large addition of hearers or members to a society naturally required expansion of the accommodation. Unfortunately, the pattern of ‘backsliding’ after a revival could mean that a newly-enlarged chapel found itself, within a year or so, with far more sittings than the steady core of members and hearers required. The pattern of regular chapel rebuilding was so common that the Wesleyan Methodist Model Plan Committee of 1846 recommended that building projects be designed with future enlargement in mind. The most practical arrangement, the committee thought, was to have classrooms and a social/prayer room at the far end of the chapel under the same roofline. When enlargement was required the wall behind the pulpit could be removed and the floors and crosswalls of the school and other rooms taken down to create an extra space for the chapel (Jobson 1853, 59). This can frequently be observed in the archaeology of surviving chapel buildings, such as Little Trethewey in St Levan parish (Fig 1). At the United Free Methodist chapel at Chili Road, Illogan, an extension carried out by a local builder, Mr Jeremiah Harvey (who was also a society member and a Trustee), involved lengthening by rebuilding the front wall in 1888 but, confusingly for building historians, retaining the 1850 datestone from the previous building phase.

These partial rebuildings make chapel buildings difficult

to date. Most surviving chapels have a recognisable show-front treated with more architectural attention than the side walls. The show front was quite likely to be re-windowed, or to have vestries or vestibules added, in accordance with changing fashion. It can be difficult to distinguish alterations of this kind from an extension forward, where the show front has been entirely rebuilt. Straight joints in masonry which present the archaeological evidence for extensions may be concealed by render. The dating of the exterior of chapels from observation is thus difficult. It has been shown that datestones may be retained from an earlier phase, perhaps to advertise the antiquity of a chapel building. Another factor to take into account is the innate conservatism of most chapel builders, who eschewed Gothic Revival in favour of a neat and regular classicism. Superficial examination of the ashlar facade at St Just (Fig 2) would not necessarily reveal that much of it dates from the 1860s, as it is virtually indistinguishable from the earlier work.

The interior of a chapel is nearly always the product of several phases of alteration and these do not always correspond to the principal phases of the envelope of the building. It seems that the conversion from pulpits to rostra, for example, usually took place after 1850 and often not until the last quarter of the 19th century or later. At Newlyn the idea was first discussed in 1893 and deferred until 1896 when it was proposed ‘to alter the present pulpit to a rostrum in order to make more sitting room’ (CRO.DD MR/PZ168). Parts of the original box pulpit survive incorporated into the rostrum. At Camborne Wesley the conversion of the box pulpit did not take place until 1911, when the communion area was moved in front of the rostrum from its earlier position behind the pulpit. A similar sequence occurred at Camborne Centenary in 1939 (Probert 1966, 7–8).

The availability of funding, in addition to the historical dynamics outlined above, influenced scale and planning. Shortage of funds might mean that a chapel was only fitted out gradually, as the money was forthcoming. Blackwater is a good example of this. Completed in 1824, it had backless benches and an earth floor. A gallery was eventually inserted from Truro, and pew rents did not appear in the accounts until 1832 (Shaw 1967, 40). From at least the 1820s the rental from seats was a significant element in the financial equation of building. Seat rents meant that there was an income which could be put to the payment of interest on a loan, once the expense of maintenance had been dealt with. Wesley may have preferred his able-bodied hearers to stand to listen to preaching, but it was inevitable that seating – from which an assured income could be derived – would become increasingly important. This simple fact may help to explain the emphasis on the fine quality of, and investment in, seating in Cornish chapels in the 19th century. Much of the most admired early seating

Fig 2 Families of style. Cornish Methodist churches vary dramatically in size and setting, ranging from the small isolated wayside chapel serving a small, scattered rural community, to the giant and mostly urban 1500 seaters which bear comparison with the largest Nonconformist churches of the industrial north. In the towns, where fashion and competition with neighbours became an important consideration, architectural embellishment was prized, although it remained generally confined to the exteriors, but even the smallest chapels possessed a sense of propriety, neatness and regularity. In their simplest form, they contained two sash windows in a side wall and a doorway in the side or end gable wall (Illustration: Keystone Historic Buildings Consultancy)

Fig 3 Table of statistics

	Caradon	Carrick	Kerrier	N Cornwall	Penwith	Restormel	Overall totals
<i>Galleried chapels retaining:</i>							
complete set of box pews	1	1	4	0	3	0	9
box pews to galleries only	0	3	3	0	3	0	9
box pews to ground floor only	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Chapels retaining:</i>							
any box pews	1	4	9	8	9	0	31
complete set (those without galleries)	0	1	1	6	2	0	10
early benches including free benches	0	1	4 inc 2 with free benches	1	3 inc 1 Baptist	1	10
leaders' pews	1	2	1	2	2	0	8
full galleries	3	8	26	3	11	9	60
end galleries	1	11	1	4	8	3	28
original hornless sashes	10	17	22	11	14	7	81

643 chapels, plus other buildings associated with the development of Nonconformity in the county, have been surveyed. Of these, only 61 are not Wesleyan Methodist in origin. The statistics relating to fittings form one of the most significant conclusions to be drawn from this survey. Whereas rare survivals of early seating might justify listing, or tilt the balance, later (and common) survivals such as pitch-pine pews need to be assessed as one element of the whole

surviving consists of box pews: seating with backs and doors. It seems that when the chapel has a long structural history these are likely to have replaced open benches, or backless forms, which were more economical to provide and corresponded to Wesley's dictum that social distinctions, groupings and separations should be left at the chapel door. Where a preaching room doubled as a schoolroom, loose seats allowed more flexibility. As pew rents became an important part of paying off loans for chapel building, and in some cases as the social standing of society members rose, box pews were introduced. They had the practical advantage of keeping draughts off the sitters. Later in the 19th century these might be replaced by substantial open benches (without doors), following the model of Anglican churches reseated in the 1840s onwards.

Seat rents were charged according to the perceived value of the position of the sitting, gallery rents being apparently higher than those below. The seat numbers of rented sittings were usually marked on the pew doors and at the Wesleyan chapel at Tregajorran the accounts of 1878 record payment of 12s for number plates (CRO.MR CB/81). Seat rents must have been an incentive to build galleries and it would be interesting to explore the relationship of the provision of galleries to the debt level of chapels. The rarity of galleries in the predominantly later chapels of north and east Cornwall may reflect a desire to be less encumbered with debt than earlier foundations. This lack of galleries would have made them less dependent on the rents to be had from superior sittings than the chapels

of early foundation in west Cornwall, where debts were carried over through various rebuilding phases.

Variations on the basic auditory plan reflect the size, wealth and aspirations of chapel communities, and are most marked in the variety of seating arrangements. The plan form of small, predominantly vernacular chapels commonly comprised two ranks of slightly ramped pews facing a pulpit, which was sometimes also flanked by pews. The position of the doorway, often in the long side wall, might be asymmetrical (towards the pulpit end or at one end due to a later extension), or symmetrical and central. Some of the best examples of these simple plan forms with their fittings have been lost in recent years, most notably at Roseworthy, Gwinear-Gwithian, Mongoose St Agnes, and a small Bible Christian chapel in St Anthony in Meneage parish (Stell 1991). All these have now been converted to domestic use. From the evidence of the few surviving or recorded examples, these simple chapels usually had fixed benches or box pews. This survey has shown that early survivals are far rarer than was previously supposed (Fig 3). It has also shown, contrary to early expectations, that early plan arrangements and fittings are extremely rare and not as common as popular opinion supposed. The earliest small rural chapel to retain a complete set of internal fittings is Penrose in St Ervan parish dated 1861 (Fig 4). Consequently, it has been recommended for upgrading to II*. The slightly larger chapels usually had galleries, normally at one end, as at Little Bosullow in Madron parish and Wheal Busy (Fig 5) which, though of a later date



Fig 4 Penrose is the earliest and most complete example of a small wayside chapel in Cornwall, with a rare leaders' or musicians'/choir area in front of the rostrum. Although this dates from 1861, it is clearly outstanding and the survey has demonstrated that none of any earlier date have survived in such a complete state of preservation (Photo: E Berry)



Fig 5 Wheal Busy, Chacewater. Dating from 1863, this is the most complete and architecturally distinguished example of only six simple wayside chapels identified during the survey as having retained their complete set of original box pews. These all have turned balustraded detail, and there is provision for 'free seating' at either end of the main pews (Photo: E Berry)

(1863), has the most beautiful simple fittings of any chapel of this type and shares a similar plan form to Penrose. While seating was usually provided on three sides, a fourth side could be added and is usually associated with the provision of choir pews and an organ. The lower seating could consist of box pews in the centre (for fee-paying subscribers to chapel funds) and loose free benches at the sides, manifesting the social divisions within each community. The most elaborate gallery arrangements are associated with the largest and best-appointed chapels. These include the large and predominantly early classical chapels such as St Johns, St Austell (1828) (Fig 2), St Just (1833) and Ponsanooth (1843) (Fig 6). Most of them have galleries to three or four sides. The earlier chapels, notably Ponsanooth and St Just, evidently adhered to the so-called City Road style, with apses providing communication space behind the pulpit. Many of the later chapels also had apses, as at Porkellis and Penmennor. In these later examples there is evidence that the apse was intended for an organ loft over a vestry, reflecting the increasing importance of the sacrament and the 1846 Model Plans Committee's recommendation that the communion table be placed in front of the pulpit (Dolby 1964, 132). Some have a pair of front doorways to give better access to the galleries and the aisles between the ranks of pews.

So what can chapel buildings tell us about the strength and nature of Methodism in Cornwall? Wesley, as an ordained Anglican minister, was determined to invigorate the Anglican church from within. He had no plans to create a separate denomination and preaching began as an addition to, not a substitute for, attendance at the parish church. Society members were encouraged to attend the Anglican church and Methodist meetings were timetabled not to clash with services. This obviously limited the requirements for specifically Methodist buildings in the



Fig 6 Ponsanooth, St Gluwias. This chapel, built in 1843, is the most complete chapel recorded to date. With its fine granite ashlar front, it is arguably also the finest classical chapel in Cornwall (Photo: E Berry)

early period, and chapels were frequently converted from earlier buildings. The Marshgate Methodists converted a pair of cottages near Callington by knocking them into one, constructing a pulpit in the fireplace and removing part of the bedroom floor, the remainder serving as a gallery (*ibid* 30). The establishment of Methodist societies, therefore, predates the erection of special buildings and the date of the first chapel, let alone the existing chapel, will not be a guide to the foundation of a society. As a general rule, societies in the west of the county tend to be of earlier foundation and thus the chapels are more likely to contain early fabric, than those in the north and east. Waves of chapel building followed major secessions from the main root of Wesleyan Methodism, particularly in the 1830s and 1850s. The record of construction dates and the survey of surviving fabric shows that high levels of activity (both building and remodelling) were sustained throughout the 19th century. The 1851 census figures support the generally-held belief that there was a surge of building

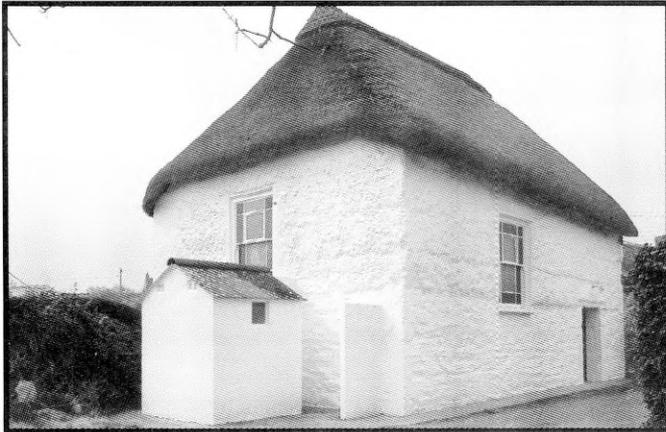


Fig 7 Gwithian. Small vernacular chapels display traditional techniques of construction and use of local materials, their variety reflecting the county's rich geological diversity. Complete examples, the majority in stone and slate, are now very rare. The use of cob and thatch, which as a building technique had been on the wane since the 17th century in Cornwall, nevertheless persisted in parts of the county. The c1810 Methodist chapel at Gwithian remains as a unique survival of a type observed by 19th-century commentators (Photo: E Berry)

activity in the 1830s and 1840s, partly as a result of the short-term effect of revivals, and it seems that there was another surge between 1880 and 1900. Some of the earliest chapels, particularly in urban areas, have been hidden behind later alterations and extensions, increasing in size and architectural ambition each time, and predate simple vernacular buildings or adaptations which continued in rural areas as mission work was carried on and new societies established.

Erecting a building, however, had its symbolic as well as practical purpose. There was a sense in which an active and expanding society was felt to deserve a chapel, as a sign to all that it was substantial and permanent enough to produce its own home. The chapel was not merely a place for preaching and worship. It fulfilled just about every social need of its members, from entertainment to the finding of a spouse. *En masse*, chapels represented to the world the strength which Methodism had achieved in an area. There can be no doubt that fundraising and the building process became a collective commitment that drew all the members of a society together and made that society secure in a way that meetings held in scattered locations could never do. The increasing elaboration of chapel architecture through the 19th century was a sign that Methodism could not just produce its own home, but a home fit for comparison with any building – including contending chapels and parish churches.

Many chapel builders were quite likely to be members of a society circuit, and the rate of rebuilding must have deterred many communities from investment in the complex architectural work associated with the Anglican faculty system. Documentary sources suggest that society members were closely wedded to building projects, and that they contributed their skills through the donation of fabric,

carriage and legal services. At the Wesleyan chapel at Polyphant (1887) it seems that the builder, Mr Strike, may also have been the designer. There is no reference in the accounts to payment of a surveyor or architect. It is possible, as chapel-building projects were often so protracted, that drawings may have been available before Strike was contacted, or that he may have supplied them but payment was absorbed into his monthly invoice. The North Parade Trust of the United Free Methodist Churches seems to have made up much of the detail of its 1859/1860 chapel as it went along, according to decisions made by the Trustees during building works. It is clear that the builder, Mr Mills, supplied some drawings, but there cannot have been a detailed specification, or at least not one that was adhered to with much vigour (CRO.DD/MR/CB/92).

It would be interesting to discover more about the design process of 19th century chapels. The recognisable families of style (Fig 2) suggest that Trustees may have asked for a design 'like' an existing chapel (whether vaguely classical or Gothic in inspiration), rather than, as was the case with parish churches in the Gothic Revival, seeking to conform to an academic or fashionable notion of a 'correct style', eg Middle Pointed. The system for authorising Wesleyan chapels centrally seems to have been far more preoccupied with funding and checking the nature of ownership than with matters of design, even after circulation of the findings of the Model Plan Committee in 1846 and the publication of Jobson's *Chapel and School Architecture* in 1850, which strongly recommended the Gothic style for both chapels and schools. Chapels were also rebuilt (completely or partially) or refurbished and re-ordered with great frequency and the usefulness of a standard set of drawings was perhaps less than for a parish church where change took place less often.

Utility remained uppermost in the minds of the builders and the desire for maximising light and ventilation often meant that small-paned sashes were retained long after they had gone out of fashion elsewhere. The sense of decorum is especially noticeable between the 1820s and 1840s. Nearly square on plan, with hipped or half-hipped roofs and regular elevations, externally chapels of this period resemble the late Georgian-style three-bay farmhouses which were being built in the Cornish countryside. This easy transference of a polite architectural vocabulary from one building type to another is of considerable interest and the availability of local funding, especially when supplemented by contributions from the circuit, meant that it could be diffused to the most modest buildings. Overall, the architectural effect is more domestic and humane than contemporary Anglican or Roman Catholic designs. The degree of architectural elaboration applied to hipped-roof boxes or gable-ended designs could either be standardised or manifest some of the vernacular interpretation of

classical and Gothic styles seen throughout English towns and countryside up to the mid 19th century, and particularly marked in the stuccoed villas and terraces of Cornish towns. The architectural form and style of a chapel could express prosperity and, often through imitation, degrees of aspiration. It could also demonstrate, through its small scale and the use of local materials (Fig 7), the vitality of a local community and their own sense of cultural identity – a strong feature of Cornish Methodism.

The Nonconformists viewed their own approach to Gothic as being fundamentally ornamental, expressive of the vigour of chapel communities and their builders, but lacking the archaeological correctness associated with the Anglican Revival. As such, they stand in the 18th-century Picturesque Gothic tradition. Tregear Wesleyan Chapel, dated 1844, in Egloskerry parish, is the earliest of this type in Cornwall and anticipates an approach to the style which remained a remarkably persistent feature of chapel design into the last quarter of the 19th century: Marazion and Scorrier are two remarkably similar examples of this type, with quality detail applied to standardised three-bay fronts, the wide central bay to each articulated by pinnacled offset buttresses. Gothic could also be interpreted in a highly idiosyncratic manner, incorrect by Anglican standards but nevertheless important for the richness of its detail or its historical context and vigour. An excellent example of this is the Flexbury Park Methodist Church of 1905 (Fig 8), said to have been designed by John Pethick (a local builder). Its dramatic massing takes full advantage of the corner site. This exuberant display of ‘builders Gothic’ is expressive of the confidence and vitality of one of Cornwall’s new coastal resorts. Jobson’s exhortation (1850, 24) that Gothic was ‘the natural embodiment, or outward representation, of (Christian) worship in our own land’ was, therefore, most frequently met with builders using a variety of detail in order to embellish the basic and usually standardised plans and forms of new or remodelled chapels.

Conclusion

Nonconformist chapels are a distinctive building type in Cornwall. Those of the Methodist community, in particular, are of special significance in a national context. They reflect, through their planning, design and considerable variety, historical factors replete with symbolism and practicalities, wealth, and levels of aspiration. Schism and revival are other factors influencing patterns of building and often served to reinforce the dominance of Methodism as a popular religion. Cornish Methodism was characterised by a dynamism and diversity of membership which manifests itself in a range of chapel types and a high level of rebuilding, re-ordering and refurbishing. It stands in contrast to the simple aesthetic of Quakerism, for example, which reflects an unchanging

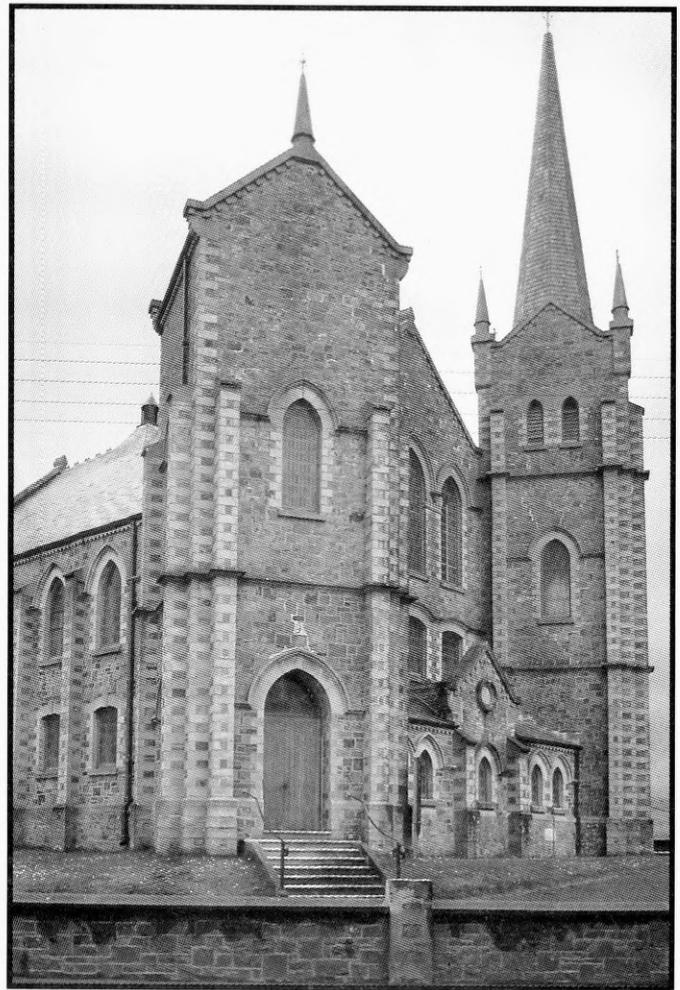


Fig 8 Flexbury Park Methodist Church, Bude (Photo: E Berry)

philosophy of worship. This has had important consequences. Fieldwork in the course of this survey has established that almost all chapels dating from the important years of expansion up to the 1850s have been altered, thus exploding the common belief that numerous early 19th century chapels have retained their interiors. Even in the period up to the 1851 census such a quest for completeness yields only one nearly-complete example, the 1843 chapel at Ponsanooth in St Gluvias parish (Fig 6).

Depopulation in the mining areas in the late 19th century must have made it more difficult to maintain closely-spaced chapels than in those areas in rural north and east Cornwall where demographic change was slower. The overall figures for the disappearance of Methodist buildings have not yet been gathered for Cornwall. However, something of the scale can be judged from a survey of chapels in the Callington District (Eade 1995). Sixty three meeting places (not always purpose-built chapels) for Methodists are recorded. Of these, only 16 chapels are still used for worship: 14 of these for Methodist congregations. Two are farmhouses; 11 have been demolished; four are semi derelict; 27 have been converted for other purposes, and three are closed with an uncertain future.

In one sense the buildings that have disappeared, or have been converted, contribute a vital chapter to the whole story: they reflect historic changes in Methodism. The compilation of detailed distribution maps which can reveal the whole picture of a region or village over time is beyond the scope and resources of this survey. It is important to note, however, that even minimal recording with a grid reference is not easy. The first edition Ordnance Survey map has some inconsistencies in designating the type of chapel shown on the map and does not necessarily show buildings adapted for Methodist use. Even Tindall's beautifully produced Wesleyan Methodist Atlas of 1873, accompanied by extensive statistical tables, is not without its mistakes in locating Wesleyan chapels or placing them in their correct circuits.

The level of survival has had important consequences for the assessment of important chapels. The most significant examples reflecting the diversity of chapel architecture in Cornwall can be selected from only two decades in the 19th century, the 1850s and 1860s. What Coleman has termed the 'heroic age' of expansion was over by the 1850s (Orme 1991, 151), and a real decline in numbers from 1863 can be attributed to a number of factors (Shaw 1967, 98): the onset of a mining slump in the 1860s; agricultural depression in the 1870s; and two events which marked the emergence of an increasingly organised Anglican establishment, the Education Act in 1870 and the establishment of the See of Truro in 1876. From the 1870s, the consolidation, prosperity and aspirations of chapel communities were reflected to varying degrees in rebuilding, refronting and even new building in the developing suburbs and resort towns.

The Methodist buildings that have survived do not represent the earliest phase of Methodism and little remains before the 19th century, yet they exemplify a remarkably wide range of architectural style and ambition – far broader than Anglican buildings. Considered individually, the fortunes of a Methodist society can be traced in the shape of enlargements, alterations to fittings or the conversion of an earlier chapel building to the school when a new building was erected. Considered as a group they tell the story of a whole circuit, linked in turn to the economy and welfare of a region.

There is obviously a relationship between the growth of industry and the growth of Methodism, a significant characteristic shared with areas such as the industrial north and South Wales. In the later 18th and well into the 19th century Cornwall was right at the cutting edge of mining technology. Although prominent Methodist individuals such as William Bickford rarely feature as benefactors, the high numbers of surviving buildings (as well as losses) in the Calstock/St Just and Camborne/Redruth areas, for example, reflect both the early establishment of Methodism as a vigorous (and often dominant) form of popular religious activity in West Cornwall and its central role in the world-class tin and copper mining industry in the 19th century. In this context the chapels are an essential part of the heritage of the surviving mining landscape.

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Abbreviations

CRO Cornwall Record Office, Cornwall County Council

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