

REFURBISHING WESLEY'S HOUSE

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SUMMARY

John Wesley (1703–91), the Founder of Methodism, had a major base in Islington for most of his life. For the last 12 years of his life this was at Wesley's Chapel on City Road. His manse, adjacent to the Chapel is now a historic house and in 1994 work began to refurbish it. Extensive research took place which is summarised in the following paper.

INTRODUCTION

Wesley's first contact with London had been through his school days at Charter House. Later in 1738, only a mile away in Aldersgate where the Museum of London now stands, Wesley had what is known as his 'conversion experience' and shortly afterwards began to preach in Moorfields. This area of park land north of the city wall, originally marshes, was used for disreputable activities such as fairs, the selling of second hand goods and archery. After his 'conversion' Wesley often preached there in the open air. North of the Moorfields stood an old cannon foundry in ruins. In 1739 Wesley bought the lease for £115 and spent a further £700 adapting the property for his own purposes, creating meeting rooms, a school, living accommodation and in 1746 what was probably the first free medical dispensary in London. Wesley would stay there during the winter months and spend the rest of the year travelling and preaching, forming new societies. After almost 40 years the lease was running out and in 1777, with financial support from the Methodist Societies, Wesley laid the foundation stone of his New Chapel in City Road, opening it in 1778 and building a house to act as his home in 1779. After his death the house was used by Wesley's preachers until 1898 when, partly due to the number of pilgrims calling to

see 'Wesley's Relics' or personal possessions, one floor was turned into a museum. Since this time remaining floors have been added to the museum and various rearrangements of furniture made.

By 1994, 13 years after the last refurbishment, the wear and tear caused by visitors meant that some work had to be done on the house. Objects were suffering due to lack of environmental control and support, whilst the overall impression to the visitor was a charming but shabby museum which did not at all look cared for. The interpretation of Wesley was severely misleading the public, being aimed at visitors who already had a Methodist background. Some visitors were even being misled into thinking that John Wesley was a Puritan or Dissenter which simply is not true. A new interpretation was needed.

In January 1993 Crispin Paine presented his report on John Wesley's House, *Proposals for Renewal* to the Trustees of Wesley's Chapel. It contained an overview of the house's history and first proposals as to how the house could be redisplayed. It was well received and led to the appointment of Drivers Jonas, a firm of Surveyors, as the main contractors of the scheme. They brought in Maryann Bowen, a private researcher, to look at the history of the house, and Ian Bristow to advise on the interior. The remaining research fell to Alison Taylor, the Curator (now Alison Bodley).

Architecturally the house is a fine example of a middle class 18th-century London town house. It is rare in that all other London houses of this period which are open to the public are somewhat grander and more luxurious.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

As the interior had apparently been little altered an archeological investigation was made. Despite



Fig 1. Wesley's house, 49 City Road

the fact that the original paint had been stripped off the panelling, Ian Bristow was able to find traces of an 18th-century paint of a stone white colour. Wall paper samples were also taken from areas where it is often left, around fireplaces, and in corners. This provided a wonderful array of 19th-century pea green papers and one red, but nothing as far back as Wesley's day. A report of the 1930's describes how wall paper was found behind the large bookcase in the study and tantalisingly adds that samples were attached. These, however, have long since been lost. Through the use of photographs dating back to the last century it was possible to trace the date of the removal of the paint to about the 1930's. Photographs also show that the existing glass doors to the cupboards were added in the 20th century. Originally doors may have been of solid wood if they existed at all. There was certainly a period when there were no doors but just open shelves. Floor boards have been changed and floors strengthened, whilst in the 1950's an

outside side wall was rebuilt. Despite the alterations most of the interior is intact.

DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

Over the years numerous guides to the house have been written but they all give the same information. Many authors have been overawed with Wesley the man and his work rather than the practicalities of his everyday life which is important when trying to understand the house. Only Stevenson's *History of City Road Chapel*, written sometime at the end of the 19th century, is more informative but still leaves a lot of questions unanswered and Stevenson doesn't reveal his sources. There is even reason to think that some of them have been lost or destroyed. Every original scrap of evidence needed to be collated and Wesley put back into the context of the 18th century.

THE RESEARCH

Development of the Wesley's Chapel Site

Wesley leased the land on which he built the Chapel from the Corporation of the City of London in 1778.¹ The original plan was to build a row of houses across the front with access through an arch, hiding the chapel completely. The Corporation however, asked for some land back with which to widen roads. The Trustees of the future chapel relinquished this on the condition that the row of houses was not built.

At this time George Dance, the Younger, was building Finsbury Square. It is thought he designed the Chapel and also Wesley's House. Wesley agreed the plans for the 'houses' with Dance's assistant, Peacock as shown in a letter to Samuel Tooth,² Methodist preacher and builder. There is evidence to suggest that Wesley himself was very involved in the design of the house as shown by a document recently discovered in the John Rylands Library, *An agreement 28th May 1779 between John Jenkins, John Wesley and Samuel Tooth*. This document lays down precise measurements and building requirements for the new house.

Wesley had always been interested in architecture and indeed his journal often shows him advising on plans for chapels. Methodism was administered by an annual Conference of the Methodist preachers. Wesley published the

minutes and at the 1786 Conference he was trying to achieve conformity between the new preaching houses, by basing all designs on Wesley's Chapel in London and the New Room in Bristol.

Other buildings appeared on the site including the Morning Chapel, which was to the left of the Chapel and used for the 5.30am services, and next to that a 'Book Room', probably on the site of the present Leysian Centre. By 1788 the printing presses which had been in the Foundry were transferred to the Chapel.³ A house on the other side of the courtyard, opposite Wesley's was built by the Steward, George Clark, probably by 1786 although details are vague.⁴ Water was provided by a well somewhere on the site.⁵

The block of small rooms on the back of Wesley's House may have been added after the house's completion: the doorways into the rooms are very thick cutting through the outer wall of the house whilst the odd shape of the rooms is due to the location of the window in the previous room. The Rylands document,⁶ however, indicates that they were planned from the beginning, even if not built immediately. An entry in the first Steward's Book⁷ records the payment of £29 15s 6d to Mess Scollick and Daniels for building against the wall of the new house in 1788. Whether this applies to the chapel, the steward's house or the addition of the small rooms at the back of Wesley's House is not clear. This style would have been a relatively old-fashioned feature at this time and why these rooms were added is not known; maybe Wesley just needed more room.

The use of the house

The planning of the rooms in Wesley's House follows the normal 18th-century pattern with the kitchen in the basement, the dining room on the ground floor, as shown by the alcove for a sideboard and the grandest room, the drawing room on the first floor (Fig 2).

Finally in 1779, one year after the Chapel had been opened, Wesley moved in but his comment does not reveal much about the house at all: 'This night I lodged in the new house in London. How many more nights have I to spend here?' 9th October 1779.

By tradition Wesley used the first floor as his own rooms, living as a bachelor as he had separated from his wife some years earlier. In

1781 there was a fire close to the Chapel and Wesley records this event in his journal:

January 30th 1781

Waking between one and two in the morning, I observed a bright light shine upon the Chapel. I easily concluded there was a fire near, probably in the adjoining timber yard (belonging to Samuel Tooth). If so, I knew it would soon lay in ashes. I first called all the family to prayer; then going out we found the fire about a hundred yards off, and had broke out while the wind is turned in a moment! So it did, to the west, while we were at prayer, and so drove the flame from us. We then thankfully returned, and rested well the residue of the night.

To have been made aware of the fire, presumably from his bedroom, Wesley's bedroom must have been at the back of the house.

Wesley never described the interior of his house or his furniture. To him, although they may have been of good quality, they were after all purely functional. Why should he mention them unless for some purpose? Some of the furniture has by tradition been preserved in the house since the time of Wesley, including the grandfather clock and Wesley's bureau. In a letter in 1781 Wesley asks Mr Atlay⁸ to take a copy of Primitive Physick out of his bureau, whilst in another in 1791⁹ he tells Sally Wesley to borrow his chamber horse from the dining room to help her exercise indoors. The chamber horse was in effect an exercise machine and simulated the effect of riding. This reflects his passion for health and fitness. In many letters he advises his friends to rise early and take lots of exercise.

The cupboards in Wesley's bedroom are adjustable and would be ideal for books. This is confirmed in Wesley's will¹⁰ when Wesley gave 'all the books in my study and bed chamber in London' to Thomas Coke, John Whitehead and Henry Moore. There was also probably a bookcase in the drawing room/study. Wesley had many books, not just because he liked to read but because he was running a publishing house from City Road. Books were part of his work and he had another collection in Bristol. The existing bookcase in the study/drawing room is placed where the bureau would normally stand meaning that the only wall available to place the bureau is where a sofa would normally have been. The bookcase is late 18th century and it is impossible to tell where it stood in Wesley's day as the wall it stands against was replaced in the 1950s. If it was where it is today it may indicate that Wesley had no sofa which would have been unusual at the time.

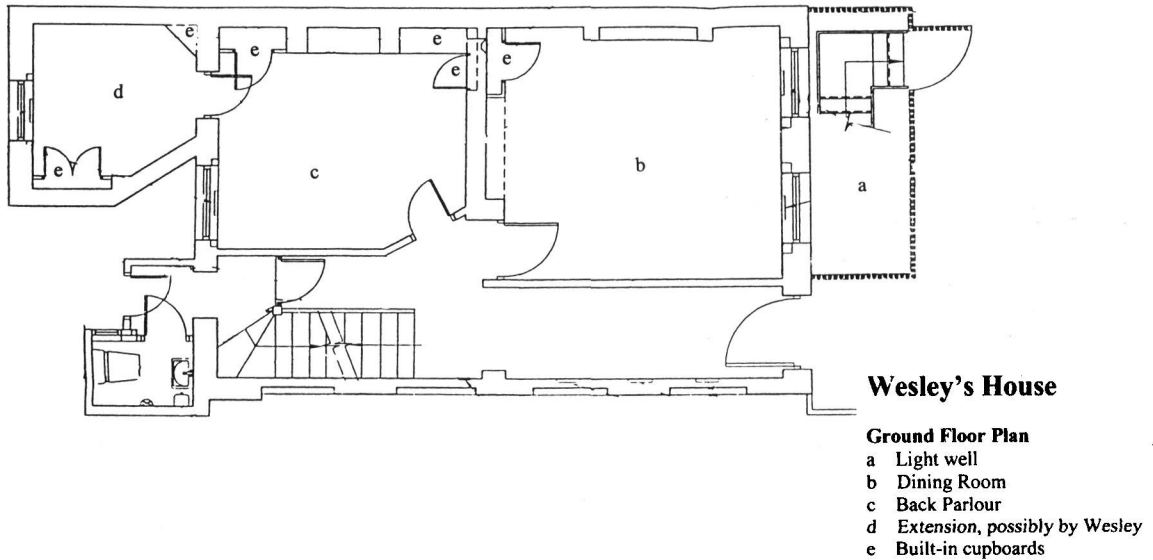


Fig 2. Ground floor plan of Wesley's house



Fig 3. The study in Wesley's house

Other evidence shows that preachers staying in the house may have brought some of their own furniture with them or had furniture assigned to them. In 1784 Wesley records a burglary in the house:

Saturday 20th November 1784

At three in the morning two or three men broke into our house through the kitchen window. Thence they came up into the parlour and broke open Mr Moore's bureau, where they found two or three pounds. The night before I had prevented his leaving there seventy pounds, which he had just received. They next broke open the cupboard, and took away some silver spoons. Just at this time the alarm, which Mr Moore, by mistake, had set for half past three (instead of four), went off, as it usually did, with a thundering noise. At this the thieves ran away with all speed, though their work was not half done, and the whole damage which we sustained scarce amounted to six pounds.

Stevenson hints that an inventory of the contents of the house was made shortly after Wesley's death in 1791, owing to a dispute over the right to raise rent from the house. Eventually the case was filed in the Chancery Court. The inventory, however, doesn't appear to have survived.

Domestic Arrangements

Wesley organised Methodism through his ministers and preachers. The latter, the majority, were unordained men who roamed the country as

itinerant preachers spreading the word of God. The former were Church of England ministers who had decided to get involved with Wesley's work. As was common with other houses used by Methodism, Wesley probably gave hospitality to his workers. The 1787 Minutes of Conference records the following:

'Q.21. Many of our people who have been travelling on business, have crowded into the Preacher's dwelling-houses, and taken up their lodgings there, to the great inconvenience of the Preachers and their families, and expense of the respective Societies. What can be done to remedy this evil?

A. Let none of our Friends that travel on business, expect to be entertained in the Preacher's Houses.'

In his journal Wesley's records that preachers regularly stayed in the house and that firm rules were imposed:

9th December 1787

I went down at half past five, but found no preacher in the chapel, though we had three or four in the house; so I preached myself. Afterwards, inquiring why none of my family attended the morning preaching, they said it was because they sat up too late. I resolved to put a stop to this; and therefore ordered that (1) everyone under my roof should go to bed at nine; that (2) everyone might attend the morning preaching.

It is difficult to tell exactly how many people lived in Wesley's House on a long term basis. According to Stevenson, in 1786 Peard Dickenson lived with the steward in the house opposite Wesley's in the courtyard of the Chapel. Thomas Coke lived with a member of the society near the canal at City Road, whilst letters show that Rankin, the supernumerary lived locally. Wesley often invited preachers to stay in the house: 1786 Samuel Bradburn,¹¹ Rev Mr Heath,¹² Robert Carr Brackenbury,¹³ James Creighton.¹⁴ When John Prickard was ill in 1782, he was cared for at Wesley's House.

Wesley's House needed a house keeper, the equivalent of the head servant. It was not a degrading position and often a member of the family might be asked to run the house. In a letter Charles Wesley asked his daughter Sally to keep house for him.¹⁵

When Wesley invited Samuel Bradburn to the Chapel he also invited his wife as house keeper. Two of Samuel's children by his first wife were to be 'kept abroad'.¹⁶ This was probably a similar situation to that of Bristol. In 1782 Pawson writes in a letter to Mr Benson '... Mr Wesley has consented that there shall be no more house-

keeper at the Room (New Room, Bristol), but that for the time to come, the Assistant's wife shall be Mrs of the family...'.¹⁷ Henry Moore's wife, Anne, may also have been carrying out the same function as the letters of Sally Wesley to Martha Hall, Wesley's sister who often stayed at City Road, are sent in Anne's care. Hester Anne Rogers stayed in the House with her husband James Rogers. With two children from James's first marriage at Kingswood School, the Rogers probably brought at least three young children with them. Hester became pregnant again and was unable to continue her duties so Wesley asked Elizabeth Ritchie to take over. It was Elizabeth that cared for Wesley in his dying weeks. Exactly how many of the preachers brought their families with them is unknown but it does reflect Methodism at this time. A preacher would either have to leave his wife and family behind or take them with him. It was certainly a life of regular upheaval for a minister would spend no longer than three years in any area.

There is a tradition that Charles Wesley, John's brother, stayed at Wesley's Chapel. In a letter written on 11th October 1777 he advised Sally that letters could be directed to him at the Foundry whilst there are other letters sent to him at the City Road Chapel.¹⁸ He certainly used it as a postal address and maybe even stayed there. Charles only lived three miles away in Marylebone and John when writing in 1786¹⁹ wrote that he could not spare the time to visit Charles and that his taking a house so far away was 'The first false step'. It would have been more convenient for Charles to stay. It is possible that Wesley's sister Martha lived in the house as in 1788 and 1789 Sally Wesley writes to Martha Hall at the City Road Chapel²⁰ and in 1790 Sarah Wesley was invited to stay.²¹

Servants would have been needed to run the House. Wesley certainly had a man servant. In 1784 in his Journal Wesley mentions his servant Richard as being ill whilst Charles Wesley was greatly inconvenienced when he borrowed John Wesley's chaise: Jesse the manservant who drove it had gone to visit friends.²² Charles also writes to Sally²³ saying that three servants is one too many. As Charles received a similar income to John it is possible that John may have had the same opinion but he was probably running a busier household than Charles. Apart from the house keeper there probably would have been a maid, a man servant and probably a cook who lived out. Maybe the preachers also brought their own servants.

At times Wesley's House was very crowded and it is likely that he allowed his rooms to be used in his absence as he did in Bristol. With a broken marriage behind him Wesley considered the household to be his 'family' and often describes it as such.²⁴ Despite this it is hardly surprising that Wesley sometimes went to stay with friends in Hoxton and Highbury.

It appears there were two early steward books, one detailed, which doesn't survive except for excerpts in Stevenson, and the other²⁵ which has little detail but records the accounts of West Street, Spitalfields and churches at other sites. Between them these books show Wesley drawing a wage of £60 a year. Wesley had the postage of his letters, the keeping of his horses, the mending of the carriage, and newspapers paid for by the Chapel whilst the preacher's shaving bills and the nursing of the preacher's children were also paid. Thus Wesley does not appear to have been the Puritan that some like to think he was.

As to Wesley's personal tastes not much is known. Wesley ate a plain and simple diet, wrote a tract against the drinking of tea but apparently drank a little alcohol for his health as he wrote to the Customs complaining they had confiscated his claret.²⁶ He was however, against strong liquor. It must be remembered that at this time drinking a certain amount of alcohol was part of daily life, often because alcohol was used in medicine.

The design of the house is small and functional but ultimately of good quality, it can be described in the same way Wesley described the Chapel: 'perfectly neat but not fine.'²⁷ The furniture which is said to have been owned by Wesley is comprised of quality pieces. Wesley's salary paid enough to enable him to live in comfort and be a gentleman, one of the reasons he was successful in his work. There was, not much spare cash available with Wesley living virtually hand to mouth. Through his publishing Wesley raised at least a thousand pounds a year and it is this money as well as probably some of his salary which he gave away and returned to Methodism. Wesley appears to have been very practical in his lifestyle, not stinting when quality was needed, being respectable but also looking after the poor.

THE REFURBISHED HOUSE

In refurbishing Wesley's House most of these themes have been taken into account. The

present refurbishment opens up the kitchen and basement area to the visitor, providing a new entrance way and an environmentally controlled room for fragile objects. This is the only room in which there are now show cases. Most of the remaining rooms are presented in 18th-century style focusing on the years when Wesley lived there. The wood work has been painted in stone white the colour discovered by Ian Bristow. This was confirmed by the recently discovered 'agreement' in the John Rylands Library. The rest of the interior has been prepared in typical 18th-century style, of course taking into account Wesley's taste for practicalities and quality. In the dining room there now stands a working reproduction of a chamber horse for the use of the public. Displays in the basement reflect Wesley the traveller, medical man, preacher and publisher. Another theme is the virtual veneration of Wesley as a saint by later generations as shown in the collecting of his 'relics'. The display in a show case questions the authenticity of some of the 'relics'. The audio guide, in which the visitor is shown around the house by the house keeper and a preacher, brings the place to life. Rather than a shrine to Wesley we have a busy London town house reflecting 18th-century London life as well as the life of a great religious leader. No previous knowledge of Wesley is needed to enjoy a tour of Wesley's House.

Chronology of House

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|------|---|
| 1779 | House built |
| 1786 | By this time a house on the other corner of the site opposite Wesley's own was built |
| 1788 | Back rooms (prayer room <i>etc</i>) of house added? |
| 1891 | Repairs to Wesley's House |
| 1892 | Repairs to Wesley's House—foundations made good |
| 1898 | Repairs and made habitable. House opens as a museum and also living accommodation |
| 1934 | Major refurbishment. More rooms added to the museum, basement flat and attic used as flats. The rooms were 'brought back to 18th-century style re furniture, fireplaces <i>etc</i> '. Paint was stripped off the pine panelling |
| 1947 | Stained glass window added |

- 1956–8 Renovation and redecoration. External wall rebuilt
1981 Refurbishment

- ²⁶ November 14 1790 Telford Vol VIII p248.
²⁷ November 1 1778 in Curnock vol VI p215.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- ¹ Stevenson p64.
² Oct 1 1778 in Telford vol VI p321.
³ Baker p41.
⁴ Stevenson p506.
⁵ Document May 28 1779. John Rylands Library.
⁶ *ibid.*
⁷ In John Rylands Library.
⁸ May 26 1781 in Telford vol VII p63.
⁹ Aug 18 1790 in Telford vol VIII p234.
¹⁰ Wesley's will can be found in the Journal of John Wesley, A Selection. Edited and Introduction by Elizabeth Jay. Oxford University Press 1987. Also in Curnock.
¹¹ June 20 1786 in Telford vol VII p334.
¹² August 6 1787 in Telford vol VIII p6.
¹³ September 27 1779 in Telford vol VI p355.
¹⁴ September 29 1779 in Telford vol VI p20.
¹⁵ April 8 1773 in Charles Wesley Papers vol 2 7/39 p389.
¹⁶ June 20 1786 in Telford vol VII p334.
¹⁷ May 2nd 1782 in Bowmer & Vickers vol 1 no 16 p22.
¹⁸ September 22 1775 in Charles Wesley Papers vol 2 7/120 p84.
¹⁹ May 3rd 1786 in Telford vol VII p327.
²⁰ 28 August 1788 in Wesley Family Papers vol 3 6/11 p7.
²¹ October 27 1790 in Telford Vol VIII p243.
²² October 4 1777 in Charles Wesley Papers vol 2 7/33 p32.
²³ September 22 1782 in Wesley Family Papers vol 2 4/11 p70.
²⁴ January 30th 1781 Curnock vol 6 p302.
²⁵ John Rylands Library, Manchester.

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