# Religious Revivalism in Leicestershire 200 Years Ago

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evivalism, or specifically Evangelical Christian Revivalism, is a topic that creates widely varied reactions. It is described as an upsurge of enthusiastic and intense religious commitment among numerous people over an area that takes place rapidly, and then continues for months or even two or three years. Though the energy may lessen, there are usually results in individual lives and in religious communities that last for decades, even generations. It has occurred especially among Evangelical Christian churches. Here the characteristics include a great sense of sin, leading to distress sometimes expressed emotionally and physically, with weeping and falling prostrate. This is followed by a greater sense of forgiveness, liberty and joy. Although this is very individual, it has also involved prolonged gatherings for prayer and corporate worship. Two hundred years ago, this all happened in the English Midlands, the people involved being called "Primitive Methodists".

## Origins

The first leaders came from north Staffordshire. Hugh Bourne (1772-1852) was not brought up as a Methodist, but after reading John Wesley and others, he joined them in 1799. Nor was William Clowes (1780-1851) brought up as a Methodist, but he was converted in 1805 at a noisy Methodist prayer meeting at Burslem - though he was so calm that some doubted the reality of his conversion. (1) Early in 1800 Bourne was involved in a revival of religion around Mow Cop, on the Cheshire border north of Stoke-on-Trent. The next year he began preaching, drawing large crowds. More outbreaks of revival in north Staffordshire in 1805 led to a desire to copy events in the USA that they had read about. In the USA, Lorenzo Dow (c.1778-1834) and others were holding "camp-meetings" where people camped out for up to five days, with preaching three times each day. These were interspersed with praying in groups, which could happen all night. People could be found prostrate and in tears, leading to exuberant joy. (2) The first Staffordshire camp-meeting was for one day, Sunday 31st May 1807. More took place over the summer, lasting Saturday into Sunday, with tents, a camp fire at night and provisions for those who had come from a distance. Bourne emphasised the smaller prayer groups and the sharing of experiences, which firmly established the new converts. (3)

But the 1807 Methodist Conference disapproved of these events, which were outside of the control of ministers and

their circuits, even though they were run by Methodist church members – and 'disclaim[ed] any connection' regarding them as 'highly improper'. Nevertheless Bourne carried on, eventually to be expelled from his Methodist church in June 1808. Clowes was expelled in September 1810 for attending camp-meetings. Separate churches or societies arose and under Bourne's leadership, from February 1812, they called themselves "Primitive Methodists" - Methodists who emphasised open-air preaching and conversions which they believed had been at the heart of Methodism originally. (4)

The movement spread rapidly in the next four years. In 1814 they reached Belper in Derbyshire. Sometimes the meetings continued late into the night because so many people wanted prayer when the preaching had ended. Then they went home singing in the streets, which earned them the nickname here of "Ranters", named after the exuberant Ranters of the midseventeenth century like Jacob Bothamley of Leicester. The name not only stuck but spread wherever the movement went. More recently in 1954, a farmer in Wymeswold told me quite naturally about a disused red brick chapel of 1830 in London Lane which he said had belonged to the Ranters for him it had been their everyday name. The building once used by Primitive Methodists in Mill Lane at Rearsby was still called the "Ranters' Chapel" in Nikolaus Pevsner's Buildings of Leicestershire and Rutland published in 1984. In 1829 seven Primitive Methodist congregations in Leicestershire were reported as "Ranters". (5)





Bottesford Primitive Methodist Chapel (1820) and datestone. (Photographs Margaret Betteridge.)

## In North-east Leicestershire & Rutland

In 1816 they extended preaching to Nottingham which soon became head of their second circuit. The next year, 1817, this new circuit sent John Benton eastwards – to Radcliffe on Trent, Bingham, and into Leicestershire at Bottesford. Benton came from mid-Staffordshire and joined the Primitive Methodists in 1813. He was one of the people who quickly became leaders and preachers in the new movement, though at a large camp-meeting near Leicester in the summer of 1818 he lost his voice and he never preached again. (6)

At Bottesford Benton was violently opposed. 'Some of the inhabitants were under the influence of the aristocratical and High Church party' and as soon as Benton commenced worship in the open-air, most likely in the village square by the cross and stocks, the church bells began to ring, dogs were set to fight, a great drum was beaten, and other musical instruments were played. He was then assailed with rotten eggs, filth, and stones. But Benton stood his ground, and won over many people, leading to a large and flourishing society. The man who beat the drum followed Benton elsewhere to annoy him; but later became a very devoted Christian. Although the emphasis was on open-air meetings, winter weather and localised hostility soon made buildings necessary. Bottesford's chapel of 1820 is still in use, perhaps the oldest Primitive Methodist chapel in use in the country, although Cloud chapel in north Staffordshire questionably claims a building date of 1815. (7)

Opposition also occurred elsewhere. John Wedgewood had gone to Grantham in August 1817, where he became the first Primitive Methodist to be imprisoned. The 'master of preaching', William Clowes, was sent down from north Staffordshire to investigate the case, and then went on to pioneer untouched areas which he was always keen to do. In 1817 he visited Oakham and 'preached in the open-air to a well behaved people, and was hospitably entertained for the night'. He made arrangements for a preaching service a fortnight later and followed Wedgewood to Melton Mowbray. But the next preacher at Oakham had no sooner begun than an infuriated mob made him take to his heels. Yet another preacher here encountered a basket of eggs and was knocked down. In Rutland, persecution made their earliest efforts abortive. Probably nothing else was tried until the 1830s. (8)

At the end of 1817 or the beginning of 1818, Clowes went on from Melton to a village 3 miles away, very likely Asfordby, where Wedgewood had just been. As usual he preached in the street, probably by the cross where Church Lane comes up to Main Street. After a while, a man on horseback holding a drawn sword came storming and threatening among the people and vowed to take vengeance on the preacher. The horseman was checked by the people

drawing close around Clowes. The attacks were repeated but failed. Clowes and his friends held a prayer meeting in a house afterwards, probably William Peel's near the Cross, licensed in March 1821. The attackers continued to throw dung and stones on them, but failed to prevent this long-lasting church surviving. (9)

# Around Loughborough & Ashby-de-la-Zouch

In late 1817 and early 1818, the movement spread like wildfire. South of Nottingham, John Benton and two other Primitive Methodist preachers, John Wedgwood and John Heath, met with less persecution and more success at Loughborough, including with Joseph Skevington. From the Skevington family came John, renowned as a boy preacher among the Primitive Methodists, better known in the later 1830s as leader of the Leicestershire Chartists. Progress was so substantial around Loughborough that it became a separate circuit as early as September 1818. (10)

Another pioneer around Loughborough was John Harrison, the first to visit Ashby-de-la-Zouch to the west and many other places during the summer of 1818. Among them Worthington had a Primitive Methodist chapel built in 1820, as early as the one at Bottesford, which is now the village hall. At Ashby he met with a kind reception. John Jarvis (d. 1838) licensed his house on the Green in October 1818 and it was probably his barn that was licensed in 1821, replaced by a chapel in 1833. Loughborough soon made it yet another circuit in 1822. (11)

South of Loughborough saw success at Barrow upon Soar, Quorn, Mountsorrel and Sileby. George Handford of Sileby soon joined them in 1817. He had been briefly linked with the Leicester Wesleyan Methodist Circuit when in August 1812 he was listed just once as a local preacher then living at Cossington (the next village to Sileby), but not mentioned among the class members. Compared with the other





Worthington: former Primitive Methodist Chapel (1820) and datestone. (Photographs Margaret Betteridge.)

Methodist preachers of the time, his appearance was unusually ephemeral. Did the existing Methodists find him as uncomfortable to work with as they had done with Bourne and Clowes in north Staffordshire two years before? Was he impatient with the more settled ways of Methodism by this time? (12)

Handford was the first Primitive Methodist preacher to visit Syston, going there with a number of friends on Sunday afternoon, 18th January 1818. They sang through some parts

of the village until they reached the village green, a frequent way that the Primitive Methodists used to introduce their preaching. Hundreds of people soon gathered. Handford was interrupted by a clergyman, a lawyer, and another gentleman. The clergyman ordered him 'about his business,' adding, 'we won't have you here'. But Handford felt he knew the law better than either the clergyman or the lawyer - 'a wicked and profane man' - and refused to relinquish his right to preach. They soon left Handford to carry on. Among the results of this first service at Syston were invitations to visit Rearsby, Thurmaston, Leicester and other places. Handford quickly became a national leader, being the President at the first national Primitive Methodist Conference held at Hull in 1820. (13)

# Arrival at Leicester

Their first service in Leicester was in March 1818. For some days there were rumours in the town that the Ranters were coming, and on the Sunday morning, the news spread like wildfire – 'they have come'. People poured into Belgrave Gate from every direction. Handford led his group into the town largely from Syston, Thurmaston, and other nearby villages. They came via the Melton turnpike, singing 'Turn to the Lord' and stopped at the Old Cross in Belgrave Gate. The preacher was John Benton again. He had little scholarship and an unpromising personal appearance, but was a powerful preacher, with a ringing voice 'clear as a clarion and carrying far'. (14)

The most noteworthy result of this first service was the conversion of William Goodrich (d. 1871). The previous evening he had been in the Pied Bull public house in Highcross Street, where the invasion of the Ranters had been discussed. Their recent visits to Syston and Ratby were the subject of a heated argument. Goodrich listened with

interest: they visited villages, sang lively hymns, preached in the open-air, and attracted great attention. They were expected the next day. Goodrich was popular for his open-handedness, liveliness, and affability. His father was a gifted Wesleyan local preacher, his mother (by then deceased) had been a saintly woman. 'I soon learnt enough of them [the Ranters] to induce me to interpose a word or two in their favour.' He was at their first service here and soon became a very active and acceptable local preacher. He took on editing the new national magazine for the Primitive Methodists in



William Goodrich, Primitive Methodist Magazine 1901. (Reproduced with permission from Englesea Brook Chapel & Museum.)

1819. 'Intelligent, self-educated, a solicitor's clerk', he offered his help in the magazine to those who needed it when applying for licences for meeting-places for worship. Indeed, he signed such applications for Anstey (1819), Earl Shilton (1819), Quorn (1819), Blackfordby (1820), Thurlaston (1820), Ashby-de-la-Zouch (1821), Birstall (1821), Oadby (1822), and Shaw Lane, Markfield (1822). (15) Another convert that day was a man named Farmer who is said to have climbed a lamp-post. 'Pierced to the heart', he came down 'a new man'. Farmer was a moulder, and shortly afterwards a revival broke out in the foundry where he worked. (16)

Another convert in Leicester in 1818 was John Briggs (1793-1856). 'From a drivelling, penniless drunkard, Christianity raised him to

the position of a respectable tradesman, and led him in time to the acquisition of considerable property.' As befitted a former addict, he supported the new total abstinence movement. 'When pleading the cause of temperance, his low stature, his corpulence, and his large and ruddy face, in connection with his sudden strokes of wit and his humorous recitals, prevented, at times, the most serious from maintaining their wonted gravity.'Primitive Methodists were among the very first to support the Total Abstinence movement when it was organised from 1830 onwards, 40 years ahead of the Wesleyans. (17)

One Monday morning later in 1818, Clowes and Wedgewood again 'hoisted the gospel standard in Belgrave-Gate, and it is supposed, that two thousand persons were gathered together on the occasion. ... exceedingly well-behaved, a deep solemnity reigned throughout, and all were as still and quiet as if we had been in a chapel. ... In the crowd were stocking-weavers, shopkeepers, middle-class residents, an alderman and a magistrate'.

On another Monday, 2,000 people again gathered in Belgrave Gate, finishing about twelve noon, and then at half-past-one they held a prayer-meeting at house of another new convert, Richard Culley, in Orchard Street, off Belgrave Gate. The oldest structures in the street now (2018) are the pock-marked red granite kerbstones and the mid-nineteenth century Orchard House at the corner with Belgrave Gate. Such prayer-meetings were reportedly crowded with vast numbers standing outside, and lasted until 6 pm. 'Many were powerfully affected and cried for pardoning mercy, and it was supposed that about twenty found the Lord'. (18)

The old Wesleyan chapel in Millstone Lane, (replaced by their Bishop Street chapel), was rented for the newly-formed society for indoor preaching, especially as winter came on. Next a site was bought in George Street, then being newly developed off Belgrave Gate, and a chapel building was quickly commenced. The members, though short of money, were extremely enthusiastic. They visited every brick-yard in the neighbourhood, and for every thousand bricks they ordered they begged the equivalent number. Eccentric Squire Day of Thurmaston was asked for a donation. He replied, 'I will give you a large ash tree that is cut down and lies on my estate, on condition you will draw it to Leicester with human strength'. The condition was accepted; the tree was placed on a pair of wheels and then drawn to the front of Day's house. There one of the preachers got on it and gave an sermon. Afterwards, the tree was pulled 3 miles to Leicester and sold for £7, with which windows were bought for the chapel. John Briggs and others watched the walls by night during the construction to prevent them being knocked down by people opposed to the cause. The new chapel was opened on Christmas Day 1819 by Hugh Bourne's brother James. It was replaced by a grander building on Belgrave Gate in 1882. The George Street site now has a range of later twentieth century apartments; the end facing Bedford Street North has a hipped roof as a Georgian chapel would have. Around Leicester there were soon enough societies for it to be head of another new circuit. (19)

#### In South-west Leicestershire

Another area of growth was Hinckley and surrounding villages such as Barwell. Although an area of framework knitters, one of the first leaders here was George Underwood, a 'farmer' and in his will a 'gardener', perhaps a market gardener with 8 acres. He built the chapel in High Street facing Church Lane, replaced later by an Edwardian chapel elsewhere in the village in Shilton Road.

# South of Leicester

The years after Waterloo (1815) were marked by economic distress not least in communities that depended on

framework knitting, one main cause being that the Government was no longer placing orders for hosiery for the Army and Navy. There was also political frustration, as no new liberties seemed to follow the end of the Napoleonic Wars as many would have hoped. These were the years of Luddites, as at Loughborough in 1816, and of the radical Political Union at Birmingham. In 1817 the 'Levelling' System' took deep root in an unnamed large village 8 miles southeast of Leicester, where they drilled and collected money for ammunition stored in a barn at Countesthorpe. They expected a general uprising on 9th June 1817; and indeed, on that day, 200 men at Pentrich in Derbyshire set off to attack Nottingham. One Leveller in Countesthorpe had a grudge against a neighbouring farmer, so he maimed his neighbour's sheep expecting to get away with it through the uprising. But he was arrested and sentenced to death (commuted to transportation). The vendetta continued, his brother determined to kill the chief witness. But when the Primitive Methodist missionaries visited a village 2 miles away, perhaps Blaby or Wigston, he heard the gospel and 'was awakened'. The next night, the preacher took his stand in Countesthorpe, and as a result all the leading men belonging to the Levellers there, resolved to hold a prayer meeting in the house of the father of the man under sentence of death. Thus in a crowded atmosphere, they started with singing as they learned the Primitive Methodists would do. Finding no-one could pray, the would-be assassin found in his father's cupboard a large book of prayers, probably the Book of Common Prayer which he read from. The two main Levellers became Methodist converts; and the barn was converted into a place of worship until a chapel (still active) was built. (20)

# Camp Meetings

Camp meetings out in the countryside continued to be held. One Sunday in 1818 Clowes and Wedgewood held one at 'Croxton-lane-Ends' near Barsby. Beside the crossroads south of Barsby is an uncultivated piece of high ground that would have made a natural pulpit. Later in 1818, linking the movement with its beginnings, the American Lorenzo Dow and Hugh Bourne went back over the track of the revival, beginning at Leicester and ending at a camp-meeting at Barlestone. Also preaching was the Quaker Dorothy Ripley, possibly invited as Bourne felt a real kinship with the 'Quaker Methodists' of Cheshire, not far from his Staffordshire home. (21) A field beside the road to Newbold Verdon is known as .'Camp-Meeting Field'. (22) Barlestone had a succession of buildings licensed: farmer John Sutton's 'Malthouse or Office' in October 1818, and his house next to the Jolly Toper Inn in 1820, followed by William Ball's 'building called the Club Room' in 1822. But only 35 were reported as attending in 1829, for whom a plain brick chapel was built in 1833, still in use today. (23)



Barsby: site of a major camp meeting in 1818. (Photograph Margaret Betteridge.)

## Involvement Nationally

Before the end of 1818 a member in the Loughborough circuit persuaded Bourne to issue a monthly magazine. It came out at the start of 1819, the first (and only) eight numbers being edited by someone at Leicester, probably Leicester's William Goodrich, because Bourne was taken ill. (24)

August 1819 saw the first steps towards annual meetings for the whole denomination. Each circuit sent two laymen and one 'travelling preacher'. As well as the first Conference in 1820 being presided over by a Leicestershire man, the third annual Conference two years later was held at Loughborough when the programme included two campmeetings: one at Barrow upon Soar at 'which many souls were converted to God', the other a 'powerful' open-air service at Shepshed. (25)

# *More about the People*

Where did the Primitive Methodists come from? In three cases there were Wesleyan Methodist links: in addition to George Handford and William Goodrich, there was Edward Smith, a Seagrave farmer. Smith was involved at Seagrave with the Wesleyans as class leader and in licences for 1804 and 1805, but by 1821 he is recorded whilst still at Sileby, as signing for a building for Primitive Methodists in Barrow upon Soar, perhaps influenced by Handford's society there. (26)

But the previous religious associations of most early members are unknown. It was claimed that most had had no strong church links before. Nor were they all labourers or framework knitters. Primitive Methodist societies were not just trade associations for such people. Goodrich was a solicitor's clerk; George Underwood at Barwell was a market gardener; John Jarvis at Ashby-de-la-Zouch was a confectioner, and so on. (27)

## The Revivalists

Intense emotion and activity cannot be sustained for long, and when it began to sag, some sought to revitalise the Revival. In December 1818 the Nottingham circuit appointed Robert Winfield to Hull, but Hugh Bourne was unhappy with him, so he came into Leicestershire instead. Here he caused a division and founded a new group of churches called 'Revivalists'. They sang the same hymns and tunes as the Primitive Methodists, preached the same ideas, got the same results in conversions, and used the same style of worship. They were meeting in Hinckley by March 1819, and soon Winfield provided a barn there for them. Nearby in Warwickshire they built their Samaritan Chapel at Nuneaton. In November 1819 they met in Leicester in a warehouse in Soar Lane, and

then in the former Wesleyan chapel in Millstone Lane. But Winfield 'lacked prudence and perseverance. His looseness in discipline, and his inattention to important matters connected with the societies, proved his utter unfitness for the onerous position he had chosen to occupy. His incapacity was soon apparent'. His societies declined, and by 1828 all were extinct. The Nuneaton chapel was used by Baptists in 1829, who probably took over what was left of the congregation there. (28)

#### Gains & Losses

The main Primitive Methodist movement declined too. Daniel Isaac, Wesleyan minister at Leicester, wrote from there on 30th June 1821: 'The Ranters have bawled themselves out of breath in this neighbourhood, and I think are losing ground. They have got chapels, and are neglecting field-preaching. We mean to take it up. They have chanted till the people take no more notice of their noise than of the Quakers' stillness. They want discipline. Their societies are not pure.' (29) Things had slowed down even more by 1823-4, and it was some time before they prospered again. This may account for the absence of a few of the earlier congregations in 1829 parish returns of Nonconformist meetings.

Nevertheless, in 1829 the Primitive Methodists had at least 38 congregations in Leicestershire, almost as many as the Congregationalists had achieved in over 160 years. They were recorded as being attended by 3,220 people, though there are reasons for thinking some figures are missing and on the other hand at least one of the others is too high. The 1829 Nonconformist places of worship census returns do not survive for the Borough of Leicester or for Rutland. The parish constable or churchwarden simply had to put down a number for those attending; sometimes it may have been based on the number of members or on the number of seats available. Nevertheless they amount to:

Denomination:	No. attending	No. of places of worship
Wesleyans	11,890	104
Congregationalists	8,785	39
General Baptists	7,840	49
Particular Baptists	3,370	21
Primitive Methodists	3,220	38
Calvinistic Baptists	610	10
Others (Quakers, Unitarians, etc.	330	10

Though their average attendance per congregation was less than that for each of the larger denominations, to achieve and retain over 3,000 after so short a time was not a record of failure. (30) By the 1851 census of places of worship, the Primitive Methodists had risen to 54 congregations with twice as many in attendance (5,822 adults and 1,386 children at the highest attended services). In some places they were by then the largest congregation, outstripping the parish church, e.g. Anstey, Asfordby, Markfield, Thrussington, and Whissendine in Rutland. Nationally, their 1851 attendances were double their membership. (31) When congregations ceased to be viable, quite a few joined other Christian denominations, as in Gloucestershire in 1823 and at Bury St Edmunds where 80 who had joined the Baptists were said in 1832 to have 'attributed their enlightenment under God, to the open-air ministrations of the Primitive Methodist missionaries'. (33)

When Methodist Union took place between the Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodists a century later in 1932, it has been calculated that nearly a quarter of all Methodist churches in Leicestershire and Rutland had first started in this Revival of 1817 to 1819. (33) Their lasting motto was 'What God hath wrought!' (34)

# A Final Comment

As seen, Revivalism invoked a range of responses. There is a story about Robert Hall, minister of Harvey Lane Particular Baptist Church in Leicester, whose influence was such that he is remembered by a statue in De Montfort Street. It shows the same range of attitude in the earliest years, even between people belonging to the same church. He was on his way to a place where he occasionally preached on weekday evenings, most probably Birstall, where Harvey Lane had a new branch. This would take him past Belgrave, where Primitive Methodists had licensed a house in 1818. He listened attentively to the open-air preaching of John Benton, and admired his earnestness and the command he had over his congregation. Hall's companion felt annoyed with what was going on and asked Hall what he thought of the Ranters. 'Don't you think they ought to be put down? ... They indulge in very irregular practices.' 'Indeed! What practices?' 'Why, Sir, when they enter a village, they begin to sing hymns, and they go on singing till they collect a number of people about them on the village green, or in some neighbouring field, and then they preach.' 'Well, whether that may be prudent or expedient, or not, depends upon circumstances; but, as yet, I see no criminality.' 'But you must admit, Mr. Hall, that it is very *irregular*.' 'And suppose I do admit that, what follows? Was not our Lord's rebuking the Scribes and Pharisees, and driving the buyers and sellers out of the temple very irregular? Was not almost all that He did in His public ministry very irregular? Were not the proceedings of Calvin, Luther, and their fellow-workers in the Reformation very irregular? ... And. were not the whole lives of Whitfield and Wesley very irregular lives, as you view such things? Yet how infinitely is the world indebted to all these! No, Sir, there must be something widely different from mere irregularity before I condemn.' When he then asked Hall whether some steps should taken against 'such new-fangled innovation', the answer was 'God forbid that I should oppose these people, Sir! I should fear I was fighting against God! They are doing much good, Sir! much more than I am, Sir!'

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