

Introduction to Methodist History

- 1739 Wesleyan Methodism began.
- 1791 Death of John Wesley.
- 1797 Methodist New Connexion (MNC) founded by Alexander Kilham.
- 1811 Primitive Methodist Church founded by Hugh Bourne and William Clowes.
- 1815 Bible Christians founded by William O'Bryan.
- 1827 Wesleyan Protestant Methodists (WPM) founded.
- 1834 Wesleyan Methodist Association (WMA) founded.
- 1847 Wesleyan Reformers (WR) founded.
- 1857 WPM, WMA, and some WRs became the United Methodist Free Church.
- 1907 MNC, Bible Christians and UMFC became the United Methodist Church.
- 1932 Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists, United Methodists and remaining WRs united to become "The Methodist Church."

Methodist Church Organisation

The Methodist Church in the United Kingdom comprises over 6,000 chapels. Each chapel belongs to a Circuit. A Circuit may consist of 1 chapel or as many as 30 chapels. Several Circuits form a District. At the present time there are 33 Districts in the United Kingdom.

The Annual Conference has been a principal decision making body of Methodism since 1744 and continues to meet annually.

The Conference meets in a different District each year and is attended by Connexional Officers and elected representatives from the Districts. In each District, Synod meets half yearly in one of the Circuits in the District. In each Circuit Meetings are held quarterly in one of the churches in the Circuit. Trustees Meeting or Church Council of an individual Church meets quarterly on the Church premises.

There are many records within Methodism which may be of interest to students of Methodist History and local and family historians.

RECORDS of a LOCAL METHODIST CHURCH

(usually located in the nearest County Record Office or with the local Church)

These records may include:

- Baptismal Registers
- Burials registers
- Marriage registers (since 1898)
- Leaders' Meeting Minutes
- Society/Annual Church Meeting Minutes
- Society/Church Stewards' Accounts
- Collection Journals and Weekly Offering Ledgers
- Pew Rent Records
- Register of Members/Church Community Roll
- Class Lists and Class Leaders
- Trustees' Meeting Minutes/Church Council Minutes
- Sunday School Minutes/Accounts/Registers
- Building Fund Accounts
- Wesley Guild Minutes/Roll Book/Accounts
- Band of Hope/Temperance Minutes/Registers/Accounts
- Christian Endeavour Minutes/ Registers/Accounts
- Youth Club Minutes
- Women's' Meeting Minutes
- Choir Minutes/Accounts

RECORDS of a METHODIST CIRCUIT

(usually located in the nearest County Record Office or with the Circuit Superintendent Minister)

These records may include:

Quarterly/Circuit Meeting Records
Circuit Stewards' Accounts
Circuit Plans and Directories
Local Preachers' Meeting Minutes
Circuit Register of Members
Circuit Trustees' Meeting Minutes
Circuit Finance Committee Meeting Minutes and Accounts
Horse Hire Fund/ Travel Fund Accounts
Band of Hope/Temperance Schedules
Circuit Youth Council Meeting Minutes
Women's' Fellowship Minutes and Accounts
Women's' Missionary Meeting Minutes and Accounts
Circuit Baptismal Registers
Circuit Schedules and Quarterly Returns of Membership
Quinquennial inspections of Circuit Property
Circuit Removal Registers
Other Circuit Committee records

NATIONAL OR CONNEXIONAL METHODIST RECORDS

(mostly located at: John Rylands University Library, Manchester)
(or Wesley Centre, Oxford Brookes University or Museum of Primitive Methodism at Englesea Brook, Crewe)

These records may include:

Minutes and Yearbook of the Methodist Conferences
Wesleyan Methodist Magazines
Primitive Methodist Magazines
Hills' Arrangements (of ministers' stations)
Personal papers of prominent Methodist Ministers and lay people
Who's Who in Methodism [1933]
The Methodist Preachers' Who's Who [1934]
Local Preachers' Magazines
Wesley Historical Society Magazines

Wesleyan Methodist Historic Roll

(located at Methodist Central Hall Westminster)

A large selection of Methodist Newspapers including The Watchman, Methodist Times, The Primitive Methodist and The Methodist Recorder are located at British Library Newspapers Library

METHODIST CONNEXIONS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Methodist New Connexion (MNC)

The Methodist New Connexion came into being on 9th August 1797 when Alexander Kilham, William Thom, Stephen Eversfield and Alexander Cummin met at the Ebenezer Chapel in Leeds and formally set up the Methodist New Connexion [MNC], following the refusal of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference to discuss questions of administration which they felt were vital to the future expansion of Methodism.

These were:

1. Times of Sunday services should be determined by those who wished to attend them and not by an anxiety to avoid the usual hours of service in the Anglican Church.
2. Holy Communion should be administered by Methodist Itinerant Ministers in their own meeting houses.
3. Lay members should share in the government of the Church at Circuit and District Meetings and at the Annual Conference of Preachers.

The MNC took root in the Midlands and North of England. At its second Conference at Sheffield in 1798, 15 ministers and 17 laymen attended representing 10 organised circuits.

Sadly Alexander Kilham died of exhaustion on 12th December 1798 and was buried in the grounds of Hockley Chapel, Nottingham. The MNC also sent its first missionary to Ireland in 1798 and in 1825 sent John Addyman on a mission to Canada.

By 1847 its Golden Jubilee year the MNC had 20,000 members in the UK and 30,000 adherents in Canada. It had 141 ministers, 334 Chapels and 38,000 Sunday School scholars.

In 1866, the President of the MNC Conference, Rev Samuel Hulme sent a letter to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference suggesting the advisability of exploring the question of Methodist Unity.

Rev William Arthur, the President of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference, responded with these words. "We have seen days of division and breaking down. God grant that we may now see days of building up."

Methodist Unity was not achieved until October 1932.

Alexander Kilham [1762 – 1798] was born at Epworth, Lincolnshire on 10th July 1762, the son of a linen weaver. An adherent of John Wesley, he became a Wesleyan local preacher preaching his first sermon at Luddington. He travelled widely as a preacher particularly in the Gainsborough area, in Pocklington, Whitby and Newcastle upon Tyne. In 1793 he preached at Aberdeen where he discussed church organisation with the local Presbyterian Church leaders following which he published a pamphlet in 1795 called "Progress of Liberty." This attacked the power of ministers and demanded the right of lay people to share in Church Government. He also believed that each Church should be "complete within itself for government but within a framework of churches being associated for mutual help." These views were not shared by the Wesleyan Conference of 1796 who expelled him from the Church. A year later he helped to form the Methodist New Connexion. The MNC was organised along similar lines to the Wesleyan Church except that its Annual Conferences had equal lay and ministerial representation.

He died in 1798 at the age of 36. In 1860 the Kilham Memorial Chapel was opened in Epworth but was closed soon after Methodist unification.

After Kilham's death The MNC grew steadily with 5070 members in 1802, rising to 10,856 members in 1822, 21,836 members in 1840 and 30,972 members in 1872, by which year it claimed to have 78,670 Sunday School scholars.

Bible Christians

The Bible Christian Church began in a small group of farmhouses in North Cornwall and North Devon due to the leadership of a Wesleyan Methodist local preacher, William O'Bryan from Luxulyan in Mid Cornwall. The Wesleyan Methodist Church had become firmly established in the South West as a result of frequent visits to the area by John Wesley with Taunton, Plymouth and Exeter as the main centres.

William O'Bryan was born on 6th February 1778 at Gunwen Farm, Luxulyan and became a Wesleyan local preacher at the age of 17. A preaching evangelist, he established many new Methodist societies in scores of towns and villages and commended his converts to the local Wesleyan Methodist churches, only to find that the Wesleyans refused to accept them because they were former members of the Anglican Church.

In 1810, O'Bryan candidated for the Wesleyan Methodist ministry but was turned down. This only made him more determined than ever to continue his evangelism. Hearing that there was no Methodist preaching in Newquay, he went there, founded a Methodist society and at his own expense built a chapel only to find himself expelled from the Wesleyan Methodist Church for "indiscipline".

He continued to hold meetings in his home and elsewhere before moving to the edge of Bodmin Moor where he had considerable success, enlisting several women as assistant preachers and getting these new societies accepted by the Wesleyan Methodist Church. He was accepted back into the Wesleyan Methodist Church and once again offered himself for the itinerant ministry and was again turned down. Then a new Superintendent minister of the St Austell Circuit expelled him from the Wesleyan Methodist Church for not attending his local class meeting for 3 weeks – a decision that was challenged by several circuit officers and church members. O'Bryan appealed against this decision at the Quarterly Meeting of the St Austell Circuit at Poundstock in September 1815. A compromise was suggested but this was strongly rejected by the Superintendent Minister who was totally opposed to O'Bryan's evangelism.

On 9th October, 1815, O'Bryan held a preaching service at the home of John and Mary Thorne at Lake Farm, Shebbear at which 22 people were enrolled as Class members – the Bible Christian Connexion had been born. At the first Quarterly meeting held on 1st January, 1816, it was recorded that the Connexion had 11 societies and 237 members. John Thorne, son of John and Mary, was chosen by O'Bryan to be his regular helper. By the end of 1816, the Bible Christians had nearly 600 members and had assumed the usual pattern of Methodist organisation as laid down by John Wesley.

O'Bryan's followers were known locally in Devon and Cornwall as "Fre Willers, Shining Lights, Ranters, Bryanites and Thornites. The name Bible Christian was first used in August 1816 but the term Bryanites was widely used for more than 50 years.

In 1817, the large Shebbear Circuit was divided and a new circuit based on Truro was created under the leadership of John Boyle.

The first Annual Conference of the Bible Christians was held in 1819 at O'Bryan's house in Launceston. 16 male and 14 female preachers attended. O'Bryan was elected President and James Thorne, Secretary. The minutes of the first Conference record 12 Circuits and a membership of over 2,000. Female ministers were appointed and for some years the Bible Christians were the only Methodist church to employ female ministers.

The influence of the Bible Christians spread rapidly – to Chatham in Kent in 1820 [through a preacher from Plymouth Dock], to Somerset in 1821, the Scilly Isles in 1821, Monmouthshire and the Channel Islands in 1823, the Isle of Wight in 1824 and a Mission in Northumberland in 1824 opened by Mary Werrey.

In the next few years, differences about the government of the Bible Christian Connexion developed between O'Bryan and Thorne largely due to O'Bryan giving himself too much power. Matters came to a head at the 1828 Conference where the preachers drafted a new Constitution making the Conference the focus of government and asked O'Bryan to take charge of a Circuit [of his own choice]. The preachers also expressed concern over growing debts within the Connexion and queried the amount of O'Bryan's personal expenses. O'Bryan stepped down as President and William Mason was elected in his place. Discontent continued and at the 1829 Conference held at Lake Farm, O'Bryan walked out and with a small group of supporters founded the Arminian Bible Christians. A small circuit of 7 preachers and about 700 members was established in Cornwall, but no records survive for this circuit.

O'Bryan eventually decided to emigrate to America and his small group of followers was allowed to rejoin the Bible Christians in 1835. No ill will was felt towards O'Bryan who was always welcomed on his frequent visits to England. He died in New York on 8th January 1868 at the age of 90.

The Bible Christians celebrated their Golden Jubilee at Exeter in 1865 and the Minutes of the Conference record 750 chapels, 2,000 itinerant and local preachers, 26,000 members, 40,000 Sunday School scholars and 8,000 Sunday School teachers.