

## John Wesley in London

Samuel Wesley was the second son of John Wesley of Whitchurch in Dorset. On 12<sup>th</sup> November 1688 at Marylebone Old Church he married Susanna Annesley the twenty fifth child of Rev Samuel Annesley, formerly of Kenilworth in Warwickshire, on the strength of being offered the curacy of St Botolph, Aldersgate.

In 1690, Samuel Wesley became the Vicar of South Ormsby in Lincolnshire. Seven years later he was given the living of Epworth in the Isle of Axholme where despite setbacks, hostility and continual debts he was to remain for 38 years. By the time the Wesleys moved to Epworth, Susanna had already borne 7 children of which three had died in infancy.

In 1701 there was a violent argument between Samuel and Susanna over the monarchy. He supported William III while she considered James II to be the true king. "If we have 2 kings we must have 2 beds," Samuel is reported to have said as he stormed out of the Rectory and rode off to London where he stayed for a year before returning to Epworth to collect his belongings preparatory to going overseas. While in Epworth part of the Rectory was destroyed by fire - a misfortune that reunited the Wesleys. The result of this reconciliation was the birth of their 15<sup>th</sup> child - a son named John Benjamin in June 1703. There were to be 4 further children including Charles, the great hymn writer, who was born in 1707, but Susanna had a special affection for John of whom she wrote, "I intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child than ever I have been."

Susanna taught all of her ten children who survived infancy once they reached the age of five - three hours in the morning and a further three hours in the afternoon. This routine was shattered in February 1709 when the hostile parishioners of Epworth set fire to the Rectory which was gutted. Samuel rescued the children and the family nurse who brought the infant Charles to safety. When they counted heads they found that John then five and a half was missing. Miraculously he was saved from the burning rectory by a human ladder of rescuers moments before the thatched roof fell in. After that Susanna often referred to John as "A brand plucked from the fire."

At ten and a half, John went to Charterhouse School in London as a foundation scholar. The school was not far from the Annesley home in Spital Yard, Bishopgate and was situated between Aldersgate Street and Clerkenwell Road. It had been founded in 1611 under the Will of Thomas Sutton of Knaith Hall, near Gainsborough in Lincolnshire. John appears to have enjoyed life at Charterhouse where he had a reputation as a frugal eater, a brilliant debater, good mixer, swimmer, horseman and rower.

In 1720, John entered Christ Church College, Oxford where he coped easily with the course in Divinity and Classics graduating in 1724 and staying on for a further year to qualify for his M.A., following which he was ordained a deacon in the Church of England. In March 1726, he was made a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford - a college founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century to train men for the Church. Between 1727 and 1729 he spent much of his time in Epworth as his father's curate when not required in Oxford.

In 1729 he returned to Lincoln College as Tutor in Classics, Divinity and Logic. His brother Charles was now a student at Oxford - at Christ Church College. The two brothers formed a small group, later to be joined by George Whitfield to study the New Testament and ways of becoming better Christians by visiting prisons and teaching the prisoners to read and write, and helping the poor and needy. Within a few months their methodical way of life led other students to refer to them derisively as "The Holy Club" or "Methodists."

In 1735, Samuel Wesley died. John had earlier turned down a request to take over as Rector of Epworth, convinced that Oxford was the place for him to carry on his true calling - but that was before he met General James Edward Oglethorpe who in 1732 had founded the colony of Georgia in North America as a settlement for imprisoned debtors. Oglethorpe persuaded John to accompany him to America and serve as a missionary to the Indians and chaplain to the settlement in Savannah. On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1735 John sailed in the "Simmonds" from Cowes for Savannah. John spent 21 very unhappy months in Georgia largely because he tried to insist that settlers and Indians followed the disciplines of the Anglican Church as rigidly as people in England. This led to widespread resentment which increased when John rejected the affections of a young lady, Sophie Hopkey, and then refused to administer Holy Communion to her. Faced with court action, he left Savannah by night and took ship for England.

On reaching England in February 1738, Wesley wrote in his Journal [Diary], "It is now two years and four months since I left my native country but what have I learned of myself in the meantime? Why, that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God."

Still in a very depressed state of mind, John attended a meeting of a religious society in Aldersgate Street in the evening of Wednesday, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738 and heard a member reading Martin Luther's preface on St Paul's Letter to the Romans. Later he wrote,

"At a quarter before nine, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. "From that moment, Wesley dates his real conversion and a completely new outlook on his mission in life.

England in the early half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century was a decadent land. Gambling, vice and gin drinking, vividly pictured in William Hogarth's cartoons were sapping the vitality of the nation and without any organised police force, crime flourished. Dean Swift wrote, "Hardly one in a hundred among our people appears to act by any principle of religion." The Anglican Church was completely out of step with the vast majority of the population.

From September 1738 onwards, John began to preach a message of salvation to meetings of religious societies in London and Oxford. Then in March 1739, his friend George Whitfield asked John to come and help him in Bristol. Reluctantly John went to Bristol and was shaken to find Whitfield preaching to large crowds in open fields! After addressing a small society in Nicholas Street on April 1<sup>st</sup>, on the following day John overcame his reticence and preached his first open air sermon to over 3000 people in Bristol. This was a turning point in his life. From then on this way of preaching to the masses was the medium he was to use for the next 51 years. All the world was his parish but it was in London, Bristol and Newcastle on Tyne where his preaching was to have the greatest impact.