

The Foundery

During the War of the Spanish Succession [1702-1713], cannon captured from the Spaniards' French allies by the Duke of Marlborough were brought to England and stored at the Government Foundery in Windmill Hill, near Moorfields in London. In 1716 during the recasting of some of these cannon, there was a massive explosion which blew off part of the roof and damaged the building beyond economic repair. Many workmen were killed in the blast. A new Foundery [or Arsenal] was built at Woolwich while the damaged building stood as an unoccupied ruin for more than 20 years.

It was to the Moorfields area that John Wesley, George Whitfield and other evangelists came to preach in the late 1730s. Before his conversion, John had attended meetings of a Moravian Society in Fetter Lane just off Fleet Street whose aims were to relieve the poor and promote schools. In 1739 several evangelists including John agreed to the amalgamation of several societies to form the United Societies which would meet in Fetter Lane. Within months there was confusion and bitterness among the members of the enlarged meeting resulting in John's expulsion along with some 20 other members.

On November 11th, 1739 after some persuasion, John preached on the site of the derelict Foundery building. In his Journal for Sunday November 11th, 1739, Wesley wrote, "I preached at 5 in the evening to 7 or 8000 in the place which had been the King's Foundery for Cannon." Afterwards he was prevailed upon to buy the lease for which he was loaned £115. To rebuild "this vast uncouth heap of ruins" would cost £700. John borrowed the money from friends but 3 years later he still owed £300 which was no mean achievement since his only income was £28 a year from his Fellowship at Lincoln College.

There were 2 front doors to the Foundery - one led to the Chapel which could hold 1500 people and the other to a band room which could hold 300 people where classes met. The North end of the room was also used as a school while the South end was the book room for the sale of Wesley's publications. Over the band room were John's rooms. The Foundery was regarded as a temporary expedient to meet an immediate need. For the first few months he preached in a roofless building but once rebuilding work had started considerable development took place in the area especially around Finsbury Square.

On July 23rd, 1740 the first meeting of the Methodist Society was held in the refurbished Foundery - this could be described as the day when the Methodist Church began.

The Foundery quickly became a great missionary centre in London - it was a preaching house, a centre for the distribution of clothing for the poor, a surgery and dispensary [it was the first free dispensary to be set up in London in 1746], and a centre that helped aged widows. Later John reconditioned 2 small houses nearby which became almshouses for 9 widows and lodgings for 4 or 5 of his travelling preachers.

The Foundery was also a lending bank. John collected £50 from better off members of the Foundery Society and appointed 2 stewards who met every Tuesday morning to lend money to those who needed any sum [not exceeding 20/-] and which had to be repaid within 3 months. In the first year of operation [1747] more than 250 people were helped including James Lackington who used his loan to start a bookselling business that later achieved annual sales in excess of 100,000 books. He was later to pay for the building of several; Methodist Chapels including the Octagon in Taunton (Somerset) and Budleigh Salterton (Devon)

A school at the Foundery was another of John's early priorities. Children were taught "to read, write and cast accounts and to be diligently instructed in the principles of religion." The school rules stated:

No child is admitted under 6 years of age.

All children are to be present at the morning sermon - 5 a.m.

They are to be at school from 6 - 12 and from 1-5.

They are to have no play days.

No child is to speak in school but to the masters.

The child who misses 2 days in one week without leave is excluded the school.

The most famous master of the Foundery School was Silas Told a former ship apprentice and accounts clerk who had been converted by John's preaching. He taught a class of 60 boys and 3 girls for 10/- a week for more than 7 years before becoming a minister to condemned prisoners.

The life of early Methodism centred on the Foundery for nearly 40 years. The first Annual Conference of his preachers was held there on June 25th, 1744 and in subsequent years it was the venue for 16 more Annual Conferences.

By 1775, the lease on the Foundery was almost up and it was beyond economic repair. John had plans to build a new chapel. The 1776 Conference Agenda included the question, "What houses are to be built this year?" The answer was one at London and one at Colne [Lancashire].

The site which John had applied for was not very far from the Foundery - only 200 yards distant. Beyond Rydal Row, a road which ran past the Nonconformist Burial Ground of Bunhill Fields lay Moor Field - a large bare field that had once been a marshy area but had been drained and filled in with spoil from digging the foundations of St Paul's Cathedral. It was being used as an area for bleaching cloth on tenter frames. After 5 months consideration by the City authorities, John was granted permission to build a Chapel provided that it was hidden from the road by a row of houses. However before John signed a lease for 59 years the City authorities were persuaded to allow the Chapel open frontage to the road.

In October 1776, with the approval of the Conference, John sent out an appeal to all members and friends of the Methodist Societies nationwide asking for help in raising over £6000 - the estimated cost of building the Chapel.

After considering several plans, John and the trustees awarded the contract to Samuel Tooth - "a local builder of influence" - who was also a class leader and local preacher in the Foundery Society.

The foundation stone of the Chapel was laid on April 21st, 1777 with John Wesley laying the first stone underneath which was buried a brass plate with the inscription, "This was laid by Mr. John Wesley on April 21st 1777. Probably this will be seen no more by human eye, but will remain there till the earth and the works thereof are burned up."

The Chapel which was known by several names - the New Foundery, the New Chapel, City Road Chapel and Mr. Wesley's Chapel took 18 months to build. At the same time a Morning Chapel was built on the North side with Wesley's House on the South side. Among gifts donated to the Chapel were a mahogany 3 decker pulpit by a Mr. Andrews of Hertford and several masts from warships in the Naval Dockyard at Deptford which were cut and used as pillars to support the Gallery donated by King George III. The design of the Chapel has been described as plain and simple. It is almost square in shape with the communion table set in an apse at the East end. A large gallery surrounds the church on 3 sides.

On Sunday, November 1st, 1778 All Saints' Day, the new Chapel was near enough complete to be opened. In the morning the last service was held in the Foundery. In the evening the first service in the new Chapel took place. In 1785 John was still writing in his Journal that he was begging money in London to pay off workmen who had been employed in finishing the chapel. "It is true, I am not obliged to do this, but if I do not, nobody else will." He was then in his 83rd year.

John slept in his house alongside the Chapel for the first time on October 9th, 1779. "This night I lodged in the new house in London. How many more nights have I to spend here?" In the house were his study, his bedroom where he died and his prayer room, described by an early Methodist as "The Powerhouse of Methodism." Here Wesley began each day with prayer at 4 a.m. before conducting his first service at 5 a.m.

John Wesley died in his City Road house on March 2nd, 1791 having preached his last sermon at Leatherhead on February 18th. He was buried a week later on March 9th, 1791 at 5 a.m. in the small burial ground behind the Chapel - one of 5452 people whose remains were buried there between December 3rd 1779 and January 4th 1854 when the burial ground was closed for interments.

Eight other persons are buried in the same tomb as Wesley. They are:
Martha Hall[Wesley's younger sister],
Dr Duncan Wright, an ex soldier from Perthshire who became a Methodist travelling preacher;
Rev Charles Bradshaw a Methodist preacher who died in November 1791;
Rev John Murlin, a Cornish farmer and carpenter before becoming a Methodist preacher;
Rev Thomas Olivers, a Welshman and a Methodist poet and musician;
Dr John Whitehead, physician to the Bethlehem Hospital and chief physician to both Charles and John Wesley in their final illnesses;
Rev John Richardson, a minister at Wesley's Chapel for many years, who read the service at John's funeral;
Rev Walter Griffith, an Irishman from Tipperary, who was President of the Wesleyan Conference in 1813.

A visit to Wesley's Chapel, the Museum in the Undercroft, and Wesley's House adjoining should be on every visitor to London's "must see" list. Across the road is Bunhill Fields Burial Ground where John's mother Susanna is buried. John's brother Charles is buried in Marylebone Old Church, while a visit to St Paul's Cathedral where John Wesley frequently worshipped gives visitors the opportunity to see a bronze replica of Samuel Manning's life size statue of John. The original is located at Westminster Methodist Central Hall which was opened in 1912 as a world centre of Wesleyan Methodism and to commemorate the centenary of the death of one of England's greatest evangelists.

Here, too, may be seen the Wesleyan Methodist Historic Roll - 50 volumes recording the names of 1,024, 501 contributors to the Million Guinea Appeal Fund between 1898 and 1908 to finance the building and extend the mission of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Recently the Historic Roll has been microfilmed to reduce wear and tear of the original volumes and to enable visitors to obtain photocopies of pages containing the signatures of ancestors who contributed or for whom contributions were given "In memoriam."

For more information visit

www.methodist-central-hall.org.uk/history/HistoricRoll.html

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