Methodism in Cornwall 1743-1900

Methodism is often seen as a particularly ‘Cornish’ Christian denomination. The reasons are obvious. Its role in the ‘classic’ mining-dominated culture of the nineteenth century and the place of John Wesley as one of the heroes of Cornish culture guarantees it a special place in Cornish life. The small rural chapel tucked away in the countryside is, along with the unroofed engine house, one of the icons of the traditional Cornish inland landscape. Now almost as deserted and marginal in suburbanised Cornwall as are the engine houses, chapels remain enduring symbols of the vigorous and dynamic society of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The faith that built and filled them provided Cornish men and women with the hope and confidence required to cross oceans, build new communities overseas and struggle with economic hardship at home.

The Context of Methodism: The ‘Great Awakening’

John Wesley’s ideas arose in the context of a ‘Great Awakening’. This was well under way by the 1730s in western Europe and was being felt in the British Isles, for example in Wales, by the mid-1730s. The established Church of England in the early eighteenth century was widely viewed as having lost its way, content to adopt a relatively easy-going position. It is hardly surprising that English churchmen wished to avoid the bitter disputes that had produced the vicious European religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Catholic and Protestant had eagerly slaughtered each other while conflicts within the British Isles in the 1640s and 50s led to bloody struggles between the various brands of Protestantism.

But for some the established church was too anodyne. Evangelicals began to call for more pro-active methods of spreading the Christian message, organising outdoor camp meetings and field preaching, setting up small class meetings to pray together and discuss the Bible and adopting a deliberate domestic piety. Religion should not be just a weekly ritual but, they argued, a part of everyday life. Their ideas included an emphasis on Bible reading and a belief that people should consciously engage in a conversion to holiness, and they were prepared to actively disseminate this message.

These emerging ideas were in part a reaction against a Catholic revival in central Europe and the renewed persecution of Protestant ministers in southern Germany. Such events triggered a rising sense of expectation in Protestant northern Europe and North America, where evangelical preachers began to meet a growing response. By 1740 a Church of England clergyman, John Wesley, was one of those preaching an evangelical message. This involved a concept of original sin, but for Wesley people’s sins could be absolved through ‘justification by faith’ as the sinner recognised his or her sins, rejected them and adopted a ‘holiness of heart and life’.

John’s brother Charles was the first to visit Cornwall in 1743. He was followed a few weeks later by John, invited by a group of evangelicals in St Ives. In that year John Wesley preached along the coast between St Ives and Sennen and eastwards to Redruth and Gwennap, the centre of a newly emerging copper mining industry. Methodism's appeal was already hinted at in the large crowds that flocked to his preaching in the mining parishes of St Just and Gwennap. The first Methodist societies were set up and within a year West Cornwall had become one of the early centres of British Methodism, along with Newcastle, London and Bristol. Cornwall's importance was recognised by John Wesley who visited almost every year between 1743 and 1789. Those who joined the early Methodists were enrolled into classes, small groups of neighbours who read the Bible and prayed together. Classes came together in the local society which met for worship. By the mid-eighteenth century Methodists had organised themselves into circuits with their own lay preachers who were local people, both men and, occasionally, women. These supplemented the 'travelling ministers' who, like Wesley himself, moved around the British Isles spreading the message. In the 1760s they also began to build their own small chapels. Although effectively a ginger group within the Church of England and still partaking in its communion, the Methodists were on the road to separation.

Methodist growth

Much was made later of the early persecution that John Wesley and his followers faced. However, this was a story greatly exaggerated in the telling. It provided a convenient narrative of a baptism of fire which persecuted communities of Methodists had confronted and conquered. In reality, serious opposition in Cornwall was only encountered by Wesley in 1745 when the clerical magistrate Walter Borlase in West Penwith tried to prevent his preaching. But it was noticeable that even Borlase backed away from imprisoning Wesley and that Methodist crowds were already sometimes outnumbering their opponents. This was the year when a Jacobite rising was convulsing Scotland and northern England and when there were heightened fears of subversion and popery. Not unexpectedly in such a climate travelling preachers such as Wesley, attracting large and potentially unruly crowds, were regarded with some suspicion by the authorities. In fact, the only serious anti-Wesley rioting that occurred was at Falmouth, where a boisterous crowd, reinforced by sailors, forced Wesley to flee the town. But urban Falmouth, with its more cosmopolitan population, was hardly typical of the rest of western Cornwall.

In the 1760s we get the first glimpse of the sort of people who were attracted to early Methodism. A West Cornwall Circuit membership book of 1767 shows that almost half of those who gave an occupation were miners, fishermen, servants or labourers, while another 20-25 per cent were craftsmen. Appealing to the labouring poor, it is also significant that the majority of Methodist members at this time were women. The early Methodist societies, with their intense sense of companionship – an observer of 1747 reported how 'they call each other brother or sister, seem to be linked together in the strictest friendship' – was especially attractive to those groups who were marginal to the Established Church.

By 1791 there were 64 Methodist chapels in Cornwall and a Methodist presence in around a third of parishes. In the 1780s too, mass revivals - a feature of nineteenth century Cornish Methodism - made their appearance. During these revivals hundreds of predominantly young people would wrestle with their sins and eventually achieve consolation by believing themselves to be saved, thereafter adopting a holier lifestyle. Revivals were times of mass religious excitement bordering on hysteria. Trade was suspended and the chapels remained open at all hours. Cornish Methodism before the 1800s was, unlike English Methodism, marked by these periodic outbursts of religious frenzy with membership growing in sudden bursts, only to fall back as ‘backsliding’ occurred when the excitement waned. Revivalism helped to give Cornish Methodism a flavour shared with the Welsh and Americans. It was very unlike the steady patient growth of membership regarded as the ideal in England, a process encouraged by respectable Methodist leaders who regarded the ‘Celtic excitability’ of Cornish and Welsh revivalism with some suspicion and not a little distaste.

Despite the doubts of the respectable classes, the two ‘great’ revivals in Cornwall of 1799 and 1814 bracketed the transformation of Methodism from a minority religious sect to the majority religious denomination. By 1814, more than 80 per cent of Cornish parishes had their Methodist society. In 1824 the only English counties that were home to more Methodists than Cornwall were the West Riding of Yorkshire and Lancashire. But these were far more populous: in relative terms Cornwall had more Methodist members than either. In the British Isles only the Isle of Man had a greater proportion of Methodists.

The reasons for Methodist success

Why had Methodism grown faster in Cornwall in the eighteenth century than elsewhere? There were four main interconnected reasons, two internal to Methodism and the other two external, relating to the nature of eighteenth century Cornish society. The first internal factor was the appeal of Wesley’s message. ‘Justification’ and therefore absolution from original sin by faith alone was available to anyone, rich or poor. And it could be achieved without the help of godly or priestly intermediaries. Holiness in this life would lead to the joys of the next, where earthly sorrows would be erased. This message, while potentially deeply conservative by implying the irrelevance of earthly material distinctions, could also be liberating. It generated solace for a population which often existed on the margins of subsistence, blighted by occasional harvest shortages and buffeted by the unpredictable and violent storms of an early capitalist economy. Appallingly high child mortality rates, chronic illness and industrial accidents could be endured more readily with the promise of the glories of the life to come.

The second reason Methodism rapidly caught on was its flexible organisation and the way it was communicated. In its early days an Anglican clergyman at Gwennap, in the heart of the new mining districts, bemoaned the succession of Methodist preachers who ‘run up and down the country’. Unlike the Established Church Methodism was not restricted to the increasingly irrelevant geography of the medieval parish. Methodist classes could spring up anywhere. And people were increasingly to be found in settlements at a distance from the parish church - in new villages such as Lanner, Four Lanes, Praze and Pendeen. The message of Methodism could also be delivered by ordinary men and (before the 1780s) women, who acted as lay preachers and appealed to their neighbours in their own dialect. In its early days before 1814 Methodism was first and foremost a cottage religion, spread in classes and meetings, both formal and informal, in the homes of the people, by neighbours, family and friends. Both its message and its mode of communication can be seen as fundamentally populist and democratic, more accessible than the remote, over-intellectualised sermons of the clerical gentry. Indeed, it has been suggested that Methodism was able more easily to tap into popular superstitions and a pagan layer of belief.

It also used to be proposed that Methodism prospered because of the failures of the established Church. The latter was weakened by absentee clergyman and in the throes of decay as its worldly clerics preferred hunting and shooting over pastoral care or extolling the Word. However, this view is over-influenced by the historical victors - the Methodist historians of the nineteenth century. They exaggerated the decline of the Church of England the better to praise the virtues of the early Methodists. In reality several eighteenth century Anglican clergymen enthusiastically embraced evangelicalism but, unlike Wesley, remained unambiguously within the Church. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the Church of England in Cornwall was any worse than elsewhere.

While the state of the Anglican church in Cornwall cannot explain the attraction of Methodism, competition, or lack of it, from other dissenting sects can. ‘Old’ dissent had emerged during the traumas of the seventeenth century. In those years Puritans and Calvinists within the Church split away or were ejected and formed independent congregations outside the authority of diocese and bishops. Independents (or Congregationalists), Baptists and the later Society of Friends (Quakers) were examples of old dissent. In the 1670s old dissent seems to have been as popular in Cornwall as in neighbouring Devon but by the 1710s it was, in contrast to Devon, exceptionally weak. The absence of the towns and the middle classes who were the mainstay of support for old dissent was one factor. A second was the political power of local royalist and Anglican magistrates and gentry in the late seventeenth century. They were quick to take advantage of the legislation against dissenters to persecute them mercilessly.

The net result was that when Wesley arrived in Cornwall there was very little competition from other dissenting churches. Unlike Wales and some parts of rural England the Methodists (‘new’ dissent) had the field largely to themselves. Denominational competition, or the lack of it, is the first key ‘external’ explanation for the strength of Methodism in Cornwall. The second lay in the social structure of Cornish communities. The traditional gentry and clergy found it difficult to control the new hamlets and villages of labouring families. The expansion of copper mining, taking off in the decade before Wesley’s first visit, helped to create the demographic and social prerequisites for the spread of Methodism over the next century. In this sense the growth of Methodism in Cornwall was fortuitous, coinciding as it did with precociously early industrialization. This was also the reason why Methodism was strongest in the west, the districts most affected by eighteenth century mining.

By the time Wesley died in 1791 Methodists were on their way towards separation from the Church of England, although many, if not most, of them still attended Anglican church services as late as the 1830s. In 1795 the 'Plan of Pacification' established a separate Methodist Connexion outside the Established Church. The timing of this is important as it helps explain why Methodism in Cornwall, particularly in the west, remained distinct. The 1795 Plan was followed by the building of an administrative hierarchy able to direct and control the growth of Methodism. However, in West Cornwall popular Methodism preceded this organisational framework. It had already pushed deep roots into local society and had left a distinct legacy. The result was a Methodism which was more critical of the itinerant ministers sent out from the central Connexion and less willing to pay for them, more predisposed to popular revivalism, and more willing to challenge connexional authorities. In short, nineteenth century Cornish Methodism had a more democratic flavour partly because of its early eighteenth century origins. Indeed, on Wesley's death in 1791, lay leaders of Cornish Methodism produced a remarkable proposal to embed lay control over the development of Methodism. The language of their resolution to the central Wesleyan Conference echoed the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and, had it been adopted, would have provided British Methodism with a very democratic constitution. But this was not to be.

From sect to denomination: Methodist hegemony 1810s-1890s

From 1815 to the 1850s the Wesleyan Connexion split into a number of competing denominations, adding to the competition that was a marked feature of Victorian religious life. Breakaway Methodist bodies were largely the result of two disagreements within the chapel. The first revolved around attitudes to revivalism (which was rejected by Conference in 1807) and 'enthusiastic' preaching more generally. For example, the Bible Christians, founded in north Devon in 1815, were more explicit enthusiasts, as were the Primitive Methodists, a denomination favouring camp meetings and mass open air rallies, established in the industrial regions of northern England in 1810. The Bible Christians, or Bryanites – named after their founder William O'Brien - expanded into the rural areas of north Cornwall, filling the gaps left by the Wesleyans. They appealed particularly to the labouring poor and occupied similar ground as the Primitives who did not arrive in Cornwall until 1825. A preference for more charismatic preaching also lay behind the breakaway of the Teetotal Methodists in west Cornwall in the late 1830s.

Meanwhile, arguments bubbled away over the extent of lay control of the church. In the 1830s and 1840s more splits occurred. The Wesleyan Methodist Association broke away in 1838. With its origins in a dispute over the use of organs in Leeds in the 1820s, the Association also took a different view on the training of ministers. It was close, doctrinally, to the Wesleyan

Reform church, formed in 1849 after the expulsion of three ministers. Broadly, these latter denominations reflected ongoing disputes within Methodism about the relative powers of the minister, appointed centrally, and the local societies and congregations. This proliferation of Methodist denominations in the first half of the nineteenth century has also been interpreted as a response to the increasing segmentation of urban society more generally into a more defined social hierarchy. A fine sense of social status and of the small but subtle differences between the social classes came to pervade Victorian towns. In this atmosphere, churchgoing carried its own social nuances and meanings. The poor attended one kind of church or chapel, the better off another. Within Cornish towns there was a tendency – although this should not be exaggerated - for the poor to meet at Bible Christian or Primitive Methodist chapels, the better off craftsmen to be Wesleyan Reformers and the shopkeeping class to be Wesleyans. Professional people – solicitors, doctors and the like – were more likely to be Anglicans. As people moved up the social ladder they could change denomination along with their taste in clothes and furnishings. For example William Teague, born in 1821 and a mine captain at Tincroft and Carn Brea, was brought up as a Primitive Methodist. As his wealth increased he bought the Treliske estate near Truro and built a country house there before the 1880s. By that time he had shed his earlier Primitive Methodism and adopted a much more appropriate Anglicanism.

Nonetheless, despite vigorous competition within Methodism continuing to the end of the nineteenth century, Methodists after the 1840s began to converge again. The Wesleyan Methodist Association and the Wesleyan Reform Church came together in 1857 as the United Methodist Free Church; the Free Church in turn united with the Methodist New Connexion and the Bible Christians in 1907 as the United Methodists, presaging final Methodist union in 1932. By the inter-war years Methodist membership was beginning to slide and union was the inevitable and sensible response. As a proportion of the population, membership in Cornwall had peaked as late as 1891 at over 10 per cent of the total population. And for every signed-up member there were likely to be two or three chapel-goers, amounting to around half of the adult and able-bodied population.

To a large extent however, in Cornwall the main difference within Methodism remained that between rural and urban chapels rather than between competing denominations. This echoed a cultural difference between, on the one hand, the more traditional and simpler rural chapels, with their cult of spiritual renewal through mass revivals and reliance on lay preachers, and on the other the urban chapels, increasingly respectable and dominated by the local middle class by the 1840s. Rural chapels of whatever denomination would share a more traditional attitude to their religious practice than their urban counterparts. In the towns a more self-conscious move to respectability had appeared by the 1840s. This appeared first in Penzance, Truro and Falmouth, where Wesleyan Societies led by an emerging Methodist middle class – men such as George Smith, Thomas Garland and Joseph Carne – began to adopt a more genteel religious culture, including choirs and organs, hitherto confined to the Established Church. Late in the century, grandiose chapels such as the Free Church in Redruth’s Fore Street, locally known as

‘Flowerpot Chapel’, were ostentatiously erected. In this instance it was provocatively just down the road from the older Wesleyan chapel. Later, these massive Methodist edifices were to pose their own unsustainable costs for Cornish Methodism, as population stagnated and chapel-goers shrank in number. But in the second half of the nineteenth century they and their more humble counterparts in the countryside were the visible monuments of the importance of Methodism in both the Cornish social fabric and its landscape.

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Many memoirs were left by eighteenth and nineteenth century Cornish Methodists and these give a flavour of their world-view. The novels of the Hocking brothers (1880s-1920s) were also extremely popular and provide an insight into the mindset of late nineteenth/early twentieth century Methodists. For an introduction to their work see Alan Kent, *Pulp Methodism: The Lives & Literature of Silas, Joseph & Salome Hocking*, Cornish Hillside Publications, St Austell, 2002.

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